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Chris harvests his 'fruits' of the sea

ARABLE and livestock farmer Christopher Sutherland has started harvesting a crop with a difference, despite the waterlogged conditions.

Mr Sutherland, from Ross Farm, near Bamburgh, also runs the region's only oyster farm, and he said that after a few months of shortages due to demand exceeding supply, the first new stock of oysters were now being gathered and will soon be available in North-East fish shops and restaurants.

He said: "They are not only looking good, but are tasting good. That's the view of my wife Helen and she's the authority on oysters in our house."

Within a few months Lindisfarne Oysters expects not only to be supplying its existing outlets in the North-East but to be selling oysters in the main cities of the UK. Mr Sutherland said: "It looks as though we're going to have a bumper crop of really top quality oysters, for which there is always a strong demand."

Lindisfarne Oysters was set up by Mr Sutherland's father John, and Christopher took over the business two years ago. He restocked the farm in May, 2003, with a variety of Pacific rock oysters known as gigas.

Gigas were first introduced to the UK in the 1960s and they grow twice as quickly as the native variety. But because they cannot breed so far North, Mr Sutherland buys seed oysters, about the size of a thumbnail, from a breeder in Guernsey. The seed weighs about a gramme but a mature oyster reaches up to 100 grams and can process up to four gallons of water in an hour.

The Lindisfarne oyster beds are exposed only at low tide and it is a slow, bumpy ride by tractor and Land Rover over the dunes of Ross Sands to reach them. Mr Sutherland said: "We really don't get enough suitable tides to make it easy to handle the oysters and

even at low tide we are often working nearly waist high in water. We put the seed into mesh bags, which are then placed on a trestle table on the beds, and as they grow the bag is opened and split and the young oysters are given more room to grow."

Grading the oysters according to size and re-bagging them in wider mesh bags is done manually and is time-consuming. Mr Sutherland is helped in his task by a small team of workers from Ross Farm, the mixed arable and cattle farm which the Sutherland family has farmed since 1936.

Mr Sutherland's regular helpers are David Renton from Ross, Keith Watson, of Belford, and Willie Milburn, who travels most days from his home in Forestburn Gate, near Netherwittin, a round trip of some 70 miles.

But before Lindisfarne Oysters ever reach the dinner plate they are purified in a tank back at Ross Farm for 42 hours, where they are thoroughly washed through in water which is bathed in ultra violet light.