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BUILDING BLOCKS

Ensuring sustainable supply chains



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Pet food processors can source more sustainable ingredients by taking a closer look at their supply chain.

By **Jordan Tyler** | jtyler@sosland.com

How sustainability is defined has evolved over time, adapting to a new era where consumers have become increasingly cognizant of the effects their purchasing decisions have on the environment. Today, a sustainable supply chain in pet food processing must meet stringent standards of overall environmental efficiency. Generally, it is determined by how it impacts three areas: the environment, the economy, and social welfare. These three pillars encompass the protection of natural resources, animal welfare, bioavailability and positive labor conditions for farmers and producers.

Sustainability has become an influential trend in the overall pet food market. “The demand for greater sustainability and transparency is driven by peoples’ increasing concerns about how their purchasing decisions affect their own health and the health of their loved ones, whether those are people or pets, and the planet,” says Diana Visser, senior director, sustainability, research and development, Corbion, Lenexa, Kansas. Understanding where ingredients come from and how their sourcing plays into the bigger picture is important to pet owners.

Martin Guthrie, director, environmental affairs and sustainability, Darling Ingredients, Irving, Texas, explains the trend as a chain reaction: consumers are beginning to place higher value in the sustainability of the products they purchase, which changes the way retailers communicate products, which in turn affects the sourcing of ingredients to match this sustainable mold.

“On a broader note, consumers are more aware of the impact of unethical and/or unsustainable practices across a variety of industries and are increasingly more interested in supporting companies that are doing their part to give consumers peace of mind,” says Jennifer Adolphe, Ph.D., senior pet nutritionist, Petcurean, Chilliwack, British Columbia.

As processors and suppliers adapt their processes to meet these standards, some are capitalizing on the differentiation it provides their products. “In a very crowded market, where noticeable innovation can be a challenge, sustainability is a great way to set aside classical product development with a positioning that will give a sense of leadership on the market,” says Jean-Francois Herve, senior sales and business development manager, American Seafoods Company LLC, Seattle, Washington.

Passing the test

There is no single avenue for ensuring the sustainability of a supply chain. Instead, there are many independent entities and programs that evaluate suppliers to the pet food market through similar lenses. Processors can learn which certifications and programs their suppliers adhere to in order to vet them for sustainable practices.

NSF International, based in Ann Arbor, Michigan, is one of these entities. NSF is an independent, global organization that provides audits, certifications and programs to help companies reduce their

Wild Alaska Pollock is an abundant species of fish and a highly sustainable choice for providing protein, minerals and omega fatty acids in a pet diet.

American Seafood Company LLC



“Certified organic and Marine Seafoods Council ingredients offer an added level of assurance to us and pet parents that they meet strict sustainability criteria.”

Jennifer Adolphe, Ph.D., Petcurean

Petcurean includes MSC-certified, sustainably harvested krill, which supports heart and brain health, in its GATHER Free Acres and GATHER Wild Ocean formulas.

Petcurean

environmental impact. “At NSF International, we are auditing pet food ingredient suppliers and manufacturers using the same rigorous audits to good manufacturing practices as those used for human food safety,” says Elaine Vanier, technical manager, animal wellness programs and supply chain food safety, and Jenny Oorbeck, general manager, sustainability, NSF International.

Organizations, such as Bonsucro and the Roundtable on Sustainable Palm Oil, provide a unified view of key sustainable practices along the value chain to establish standards and encourage adoption of the practices. Other entities, such as the Pet Sustainability Council, B-Corp and the Marine Seafoods Council (MSC) help guide suppliers and processors toward sustainable practices. Ecovadis rates ingredient manufacturers’ sustainability performance using a methodology based on international corporate social responsibility standards such as the Global Reporting Initiative, the United Nations Global Compact and the ISO 26000.

Carbon footprint is another key indicator, according to Herve, which refers to the amount of carbon compounds released into the atmosphere due to the consumption of fossil fuels. American Seafoods adheres to three main sustainability indicators specific to the seafood industry: lowest possible by-catch, carbon footprint, and fresh water footprint. Lowest possible by-catch refers to the ability to avoid harvesting undesirable fish, or those whose absence would take a toll on the ecosystem. American Seafoods currently achieves less than 1% by-catch and maintains the lowest fresh water footprint of any other protein source.

For some processors, sustainable standards go beyond the three main principles to include more specific

guidelines. Petcurean considers an ingredient sustainable if it meets five criteria: following humane animal welfare practices; protecting water supplies and limiting water use; protecting farmer, rancher and producer livelihoods; ensuring the preservation of natural resources; and actively working to preserve biodiversity.

Petcurean prefers to work with suppliers who have implemented or adhere to a sustainability program, and often sources ingredients that are certified organic or seafoods certified by the MSC. “The primary goal of organic production is to use farming practices that are sustainable and harmonious with the environment. MSC certification is based upon three principles: sustainable fish stocks; minimizing environmental impacts; and effective management,” Adolphe explains. “Certified organic and MSC ingredients offer an added level of assurance to us and pet parents that they meet strict sustainability criteria.”

While the certification process is crucial in determining sustainability, it can be tedious for both processors and suppliers. “Those companies who do commit to their own sustainability journey are bound to experience a certain amount of audit fatigue; it comes with the territory,” Visser says.

Innovative ingredients

Some pet food manufacturers have turned to new, innovative ingredients to become more sustainable. Alternative forms of protein, such as insects and vegetable- or plant-based, have much smaller environmental footprints because they demand less resources in order to cultivate them. According to Vanier and Oorbeck, “Pet owners realize that dogs and cats chase and eat insects instinctively, so this may make it more ‘palatable’ when considering it as an ingredient in pet food.”



Consumers are beginning to place a higher value in the sustainability and transparency of a product, including the impact its ingredients may have on the environment.

American Seafoods Company LLC

One seafood ingredient poised for sustainability is the Wild Alaska Pollock. “American pollock producers supply some of the largest food companies in the world and are well suited to meet the economic and quality standards expected by the pet industry, and offer significant environmental credentials to add value to a brand,” says Herve.

Petcurean uses Wild Alaska Pollock in one of its dog food formulas. “As a member of the cod family, pollock is an excellent source of protein, minerals and omega fatty acids, and it is low in carbohydrates, cholesterol and fat,” Adolphe says. “Pollock is a tremendously abundant species of fish generally found in large schools, making them efficient to harvest.” In its GATHER Free Acres and Wild Ocean pet food formulas, Petcurean sources MSC-certified, sustainably harvested krill. “Krill is not only a unique ingredient, but a great alternative source of marine omega-3 fatty acids, given concerns about the sustainability of wild fish stocks,” Adolphe says.

The use of by-products also plays an important role as a sustainable source. The rendering industry has capitalized on this trend over the past 15 years, says Guthrie, making “old” ingredients become “new,” or rather more accepted in the use of pet food processing. “A fresh look has been granted to many by-products, including rendered products, because of their obvious advantage in sustainability,” he says.

However, achieving sustainability in pet food processing poses some challenges. Guthrie describes one challenge as “greenwashing,” or making claims toward the sustainability of a product without a strong foundation that it is truly sustainable. “Willingness to provide data and metrics can be a stumbling block,” explains Guthrie, such as providing information on traceability. “Ingredient providers should have data and a verifiable production history to back it up. There are many claims, schemes, and certifications but nothing is better than transparency, data, and a good supplier reputation.”

Taking the first step

There are a number of ways pet food processors can begin the journey toward sourcing more sustainable ingredients.

For example, local ingredients are highly sustainable. “They cut down on transportation and reduce the amount of emission and energy used,” says Vanier and Oorbeck. In the seafood industry, Herve says sourcing domestically can be beneficial to the environment because fishers and fish processors are often more knowledgeable about specific harvest, production and quality management variables than foreign suppliers.

Processors can also work against the stereotype of “ugly foods,” or ingredients that might not look as fresh but offer the same amount of nutrients and bioavailability in a pet diet, by embracing them. “Instead of letting fruits and veggies go to waste because they don’t meet the cosmetic quality standards, these products are being used more sustainably by incorporating them into pet food and treats,” says Vanier and Oorbeck.

Herve provides three best practices for processors looking to source more responsibly: look locally, choose suppliers who are engaged in the journey to sustainability, and build strong, mutually beneficial relationships with those suppliers. Collaborating with suppliers is crucial for continuous improvement in the sustainability of the industry. “As an ingredient manufacturer, we have to understand the supply chain and what our individual customers want and need,” Guthrie says. “It requires the development of a trusting relationship, good communications, good documentation on our part as well as farther up the supply chain.”

Utilizing third-party audits and certification programs is key to verifying supply chain practices, policies and data. Risk assessment is another important step that pet food processors must embrace to truly understand their supply chain. “Consider risks associated with the country of origin and the specific type of raw material,” Visser says. “Determine your best strategy for addressing the areas of greatest risk, for influencing third parties critical to your supply chain and for certifications that will make a significant impact.”

Achieving a sustainable pet food supply chain will not happen overnight but, with the correct certifications, guidance and commitment, it offers a bright future for our planet while still providing quality nutrition for our pets. **PPF**

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