Pardon Me. Is That Seaweed in My Milk?

The surprising versatility of a key natural resource – and what FMC is doing to help ensure its renewability for future generations.

A THREE-PART STORY
As we learned in the first installment of this story, seaweed harvesting and stewardship are valuable parts of FMC BioPolymer’s success in formulating food ingredients and other valued-added characteristics in products throughout the world – from chocolate milk to shampoo. We also explored the work of brown seaweed harvesters in the icy waters off the coast of Norway and similar harvests in waters near Iceland, Chile, North Africa and Canada.

The Cash Crop

In places like the Philippines, Indonesia, Tanzania and Madagascar carageenophytes are cultivated and harvested in warm, shallow water. Often, entire communities work to bring this lucrative cash crop to market. In many locations, where subsistence living was the former norm, these communities improve their standard of living and quality of life with this reliable cash crop.

For these often remote regions, FMC BioPolymer took a leadership role in establishing standards for product consistency as well as the health and safety of the workforce. The company developed a training program that covers the latest farming technology and practices. The program promotes productivity increases while providing safety and health education, and guidelines for environmentally sustainable practices.

Implementing the program typically has required tapping into the local culture and value systems as well as the needs of the farmers and their families. In a major supply area of Madagascar, for example, FMC BioPolymer donated the funds to build a school. Now the children of Nosy Ankao are assured a primary education in one of the best school buildings within 50 miles.

In Tanzania, local FMC officials noticed an increase in worker absences. Upon investigation they discovered that many locals battled malaria, primarily because they had no protection from mosquitoes. FMC BioPolymer employees ran campaigns to purchase mosquito netting and ultimately bought over 1,500 nets for farming families.
FMC BioPolymer also recently instituted a “Footwear for Farmers” campaign. Planting, nurturing and harvesting an underwater crop left workers’ bare feet susceptible to wounds from stingrays and sea urchins. The campaign aimed to provide 500 pairs of rubber boots to help protect the farmers, the crop, and the local economy – a goal that was successfully achieved.

In many African village communities, there is a special role for women in the seaweed farming industry. With an innate entrepreneurial spirit and better money management skills than some of their male counterparts, women now have new opportunities to expand their role in sustaining their families and communities.

FMC’s seaweed farming efforts in Indonesia have changed many lives. Most farmers now are able to send their sons and daughters to school and even on to the university. In Geger, farmer Nyoman Letong sent his son, Wayan Muntra, to law school. Farmer Wayann Kode’s daughter, Wayan Werti, became a teacher. And two farmers in Lembongan were able to send their sons to medical school.

Erick Ask, manager of raw material development for FMC BioPolymer, says everyone worldwide who brings seaweed from the ocean to production have one thing in common: “There is a shared passion for seaweed. I’ve met supply-company owners, Norwegian harvesters and farmers from Zanzibar to Indonesia who are really passionate about the production of seaweed. There really are ‘seaweed people.’”

To Be Continued...

In the third and final part of this story, you will learn more about seaweed’s use in consumer products and how FMC is working to improve sustainability practices at each link in the production chain.

Do you have comments or ideas on sustainability for FMC? Please share them at sustainability.info@fmc.com.