

Clean Water, Soil Vital — Brevard NC

[February 14, 2013 | Vol. 127-No. 13](#)

Last Friday, representatives of Gaia Herbs and the local trout industry told members of the [Transylvania Natural Resources Council \(TNRC\)](#) that clean water and even soil are imperative to the success of their operations.

Ann Buchman, vice president of marketing for Gaia Herbs, said the company needs clean water and soil if it is to produce organic herbal extracts that are free of toxins.

If not, the extracts can become more toxic because they contain concentrations of the natural product.

“Organic farming is what we do. The soils have to be clean,” said Buchman.

In fact, it was the biodiversity and natural cleanliness of the area that brought Gaia here in the first place. [Brevard](#) had the clean soil and water, as well as the biodiversity and the proximity of manufacturing facilities.

“We’re a grower and a manufacturer,” she said. “Brevard seemed perfect for that.”

To keep the soil clean, Gaia does not use pesticides. Weeds in the garden are hand-picked, and natural predators are used to combat pests, such as special wasps that eat grub larvae.

“We let nature take care of things like that. We use nature to work with nature,” she said.

As a result, Gaia, which produces medicinal honey, has never experienced a bee colony collapse. Pesticide use has been blamed for the collapse of bee hives.

Buchman said some people have a misperception of Gaia. While the company grows some of the herbs used in its products, it’s in the business of making herbal extracts and selling them.

“We don’t sell plants,” she said. “We sell extracts from the plants.”

The more than 130 people who are employed by Gaia work primarily in manufacturing and distribution. More than 200,000 bottles of herbal products are shipped from the Brevard facility each month, making it one of the largest organic herbal manufacturers in the United States.

Since roughly 30 percent of the plants used in the extracts are grown at Gaia, the program has instituted a traceability program. Visitors to the company website can actually track where the plants used in the extract they are purchasing were grown. It is the only such herbal extract company in the U.S. that offers this service.

Whenever possible, Gaia uses local sources. For example, TVS does some of the packaging while Blue Ridge Biofuels supplies fuel for the tractors. Organically grown plants from area farms are also used.

Gaia is a community partner in a number of ways. It supplies superfluous produce to the Bread of Life. It also hosts numerous conferences and workshops where people can learn how to grow organic produce.

“The growers we’ve worked with are really thriving,” she said.

About 150 natural product retailers and health practitioners visit the facility every year. Those people often stay in local hotels and dine in local restaurants.

Gaia also promotes a healthy lifestyle for its employees. Part of the farm is set aside for employees to grow produce.

Last year, those employees harvested 30,000 pounds of food for themselves and their families. At the beginning of every year, employees receive a rather extensive physical. In-house yoga and other programs are offered.

In the near future, the company plans to have bicycles for the employees to ride from the office to the fields.

“We are helping the health of the community,” said Buchman.

While the company is doing well and has grown from 25 employees in 1996 to its current number of around 130, there are some future risks.

One concern is the economy. Buchman said when the economy hits a downturn, price becomes a major consideration for consumers.

However, when the economy tanked in 2008, sales for Gaia actually increased. Buchman attributes that to the possibility that doctor’s visits became too expensive, so people looked to other alternatives. She also believes that more people “are choosing to take control of their own health.”

Buchman also said regulations and lawsuits could become increasing risks. As the herbal supplement market grows, more attorneys may seek litigation against these companies.

Because Gaia follows the highest standards in producing its extracts, there are times when there are not enough clean source materials for production.

“There are times we go out of stock,” she said.

Despite those possible risks, however, Gaia is one of the top companies in its industry and the future looks bright.

“The good news is that we’re a leader,” she said.

While Gaia Herbs is a leader in the herbal extract business, [Transylvania County](#) is a leader in trout production. Dick Bragg, owner of Rosman-based Bragg Trout Farm, told TNRC members that in 2007, [North Carolina](#) produced 3.4 million pounds of trout, and [Transylvania County](#) was the highest producer with 1.1 million pounds.

Bragg, who has 54 production units on five acres of land, produces between 350,000 to 400,000 pounds of trout a year.

Bragg said the high quality of water in the county, primarily due to protected forests, is the reason the trout industry was established in this county. If the quality or quantity of the water changes, that can cause major problems for trout.

“We have a problem with long, hot, dry summers,” he said.

As the temperature of the water increases, so do the problems.

Destructive parasites thrive in warmer water when the higher temperatures make the trout more susceptible to disease.

There also needs to be a constant flow of water, though not too much. Bragg said during heavy rains the pH balance drops dramatically and the water becomes acidic, which puts stress on the fish.

A constant water flow also ensures an adequate oxygen supply to the trout.

When streams get low and the water flow slows, usually in July through September, the trout become stressed. Bragg said he could lose between 10 to 40 percent of his harvest when the oxygen level becomes too low.

To combat the lack of oxygen, trout farmers have begun adding oxygen to their runs during the summer months.

This has allowed trout farmers to nearly double their production, but oxygen is not cheap. Bragg said he has paid between \$35,000 to \$60,000 a year for oxygen. After feed, oxygen is his second highest cost.

Bragg also said the erosion and clear-cut banks, which increase sedimentation in the creeks and allow more sunlight to hit the water, thus making it warmer, also create problems.

Most of the trout raised privately in the county are either sold to food processors or to stock private ponds and streams.

The state fish hatcheries stock trout in public waterways.

While there are several trout farms in the county, Bragg said there are no trout processors in the county.

The two trout processors in the state are located in Lake Logan and Andrews.

(The next TNRC meeting will be held Friday, March 8, at 9 a.m. in the Community Services Building.)