

# How AAK Is Leading the Way In Sustainably-Sourced Shea

AAK has teamed up with the Global Shea Alliance and USAID to ensure a reliable shea source for the personal care industry.

Tom Branna • Editorial Director

FOR RAW material supplier AAK, a company whose future is staked to sourcing natural ingredients, sustainability isn't just a lofty, feel-good goal, it's imperative. Eight years ago, the company developed a direct sourcing Sustainability Partner Program to source shea in West Africa. The idea was to eliminate middle men in Ghana and Europe, and put money directly into the pockets of the women who were actually harvesting shea kernels. Today, AAK's efforts have expanded to include more than 100,000 women in the region, and now the company is working with other partners to expand the impact of its efforts.

"We make contracts with women harvesting shea kernels, so they get a larger share of the profits," explained John O'Keefe, director, personal care, AAK USA. "We provide the pre-financing too."

Partnering with AAK gives women access to the company's training methods, and helps improve product quality and productivity, as well. Now, AAK wants to do even more. O'Keefe noted that there are more than 1,000,000 women who contribute to the AAK supply chain.

"Full participation can make a huge impact on a large number

of women who are living in developing countries and who rely on shea harvesting for their income."

Burt's Bees executives recognized the importance of a sustainable supply chain and the company is a founding member of the AAK Sustainability Partner Program. According to Shannon Hess, associate director-responsible sourcing, Burt's Bees, by working together, AAK and Burt's Bees can change the lives of women in the region.

"There are a lot of initiatives in West Africa that are well-intentioned, but Burt's Bees and AAK have the commercial outlet to truly impact many lives and create more responsibly-sourced ingredients," said Hess.

The huge volumes of kernels that get moved through the AAK program give the women who harvest them more negotiating power, which in turn, enables them to create a sustainable business for themselves, according to Hess.

The program also teaches women how to expand their harvesting capacity, builds more efficient stoves that use less firewood and produce less smoke, and even plant more shea.



Processing shea

Burt's Bees' success has encouraged AAK to promote its program to other customers. Personal care manufacturers who rely on shea for their product formulations can contact AAK directly to learn how to get involved with the Sustainability Partner Program.

### Something to Build On

To make a good idea even better, AAK is partnering with the Global Shea Alliance and USAID (United States Agency for International Development), the government agency which is primarily responsible for administering civilian foreign aid, to attract more funds for the program.

"Companies that engage with us will see a lot of benefits," asserted O'Keefe. "This is a call to action to increase the amount of shea demand for cosmetics, to create more income for women harvesters and to help increase the direct sourcing model that we have in West Africa."

There's good reason for all the interest in shea. When incorporated at functional levels (2-4% shea content), shea strengthens skin barrier properties, increases dermal collagen, inhibits protease activity and has anti-inflammatory activity.

The material's environmental profile is impressive, too. Shea is natural and renewable, and sourced from wild-growing trees without any land clearing. It does not require fertilizers or pesticides and harvesting is performed manually. Shea trees even form a protective barrier against desertification.

### Strength in Numbers

By partnering with the Global Shea Alliance, AAK, Burt's Bees and other companies are able to compound the benefits that their organizations bring to shea farmers. The GSA was established as a nonprofit industry association in 2011 with the support of 25 founding members. Headquarters are in Accra, Ghana.

"Today, we have over 430 members from 31 countries including international brands and retailers, ingredient suppliers, NGOs, and women's groups," explained Badiè Marico, president, GSA. "Through public-private partnerships, the GSA promotes industry sustainability, quality practices and standards, and demand for shea in food and cosmetics."

Last year, GSA and USAID signed a \$13 million, five-year agreement to promote shea markets worldwide and improve sustainable production in Africa. The goal of the partnership is to help women collectors and processors organize into cooperatives, obtain equipment and training, and improve the financial benefit from the sale of their products.

"Stronger women's groups will process more shea, improve quality, and protect the trees," explained Marico. "The partnership

will match up to \$6.5 million in USAID funds with \$6.5 million in private sector funding raised by the GSA to implement promotional and sustainability activities in Benin, Burkina Faso, Cote d'Ivoire, Ghana, Mali and Nigeria."

These projects include:

- Construct 250 warehouses for female shea collector and processor groups;
- Provide capacity building and trainings for 137,500 women shea collectors and processors;
- Launch health and safety initiatives for women collectors;
- Improve the financial benefit of women collectors and processors by 50%;
- Launch research projects to improve shea tree planting material;
- Support tree planting campaigns and improve management of parklands;
- Launch conservation resource conservation projects to reduce wood and water use; and
- Host annual conferences and exhibitions in Africa, the US and the EU.

As a founding member of the GSA, AAK is a member of the GSA executive committee and volunteers on GSA's quality and sustainability working groups. In addition, AAK is a sustainability partner implementing the following work streams: cooperative development, health and safety trainings, and conservation pilot projects.

According to Marico, the GSA gives beauty product manufacturers the following benefits: (1) personalized assistance to network within the supply chain; (2) technical support for supply chain, marketing or sustainability initiatives; (3) industry and media exposure through GSA publications and events; (4) opportunities to help establish industry policy through its sustainability or

quality working groups; (5) a variety of benefits through the GSA sustainability program including access to project funding; and (6) the opportunity to collaborate with suppliers and other supply chain stakeholders to improve product sustainability.

"We're all working together to execute this program in the beauty industry," concluded O'Keefe. "The AAK Sustainability Partner Program is for any personal care company that is looking to engage in real, sustainable progress and contribute while using shea-based technology to increase the social value of their brands."

Working with organizations like Burt's Bees, AAK and GSA sounds like a win-win-win proposition for any beauty company using shea in its personal care formulas. ●

