

Transitions towards a sustainable supply chain

Making the biggest impact with slow fashion

Exploring MR MARVIS' additional initiatives to minimize their impact on people, environment, and the climate

Crucial importance of inclusive change

An interview with Bart Schoonderwoerd of Technische Unie

Set to change?



Joost Wouters – The Seaweed Company
Willemijn Potjer – The Seaweed Company
Laura van Doorne – The Seaweed Company

Jojan Heinen – Set
Marielle van Gastel – Set

5 minutes
Interview



The Seaweed Company: Towards a healthy food chain

Seaweed is one of the fastest-growing organisms in the world. It can absorb substances like CO₂ from seawater and, moreover, it grows without the need for land, fresh water, fertilizers, or pesticides. Additionally, seaweed can seamlessly replace a quarter of the meat in a hamburger without altering its taste. Intrigued by the potential of seaweed, Jojan and Marielle delved deeper into the world of this industry. They visited the office of **The Seaweed Company** in Schiedam to sit down with the founder and SeaEO, **Joost Wouters**, along with **Willemijn Potjer**, Head of Supply Chain, and **Laura van Doorne**, Quality Control & Supply Chain Support.

Jojan: Joost, I'm really curious about how you started **The Seaweed Company** five years ago.

Joost: "I worked in marketing roles at PepsiCo and Procter & Gamble for many years. When I was working on a marketing plan to encourage children to drink more cola at one point, I thought to myself: Is this what I should be doing with my skills? That's when I came across someone working with seaweed, and it resonated with me. I dedicated a year and a half to delving into the world of seaweed. I was certain that starting a seaweed company would be successful. During that time, I met Stefan and Edwin. Together, we founded the company five years ago."

Marielle: Willemijn, when you started working here, there was nothing set up in terms of supply chain. What does it take to establish a sustainable supply chain, and what does it look like?

Willemijn: "Our supply chain is concise. We acquire seaweed seeds from Hortimare, which we use for our seaweed farms in the Netherlands and Ireland. Additionally, we have farms in India and Morocco, and a small test site in Greenland. This geographical diversity is crucial because not every type of seaweed (there are 12,000 species) grows in every climate. The farms are run by local fishing families, offering them a new source of income alongside traditional fishing, where earnings are declining. The seaweed is locally dried and then shipped to the Netherlands in full container loads. A contract manufacturer processes our dried seaweed into flakes or powder and blends it into the final product."

Joost: "In Ireland, we recently achieved a significant milestone. We established our own factory for the seaweed grown there. This facility handles all stages of the production process: washing, drying, and cutting. If we can combine production and processing into the final product at one geographical location, we can reduce the number of transportation movements."

Jojan: You supply dried seaweed as an ingredient to other companies and partners.

What products do they make from it?
Joost: "In 2023, we focused on two categories: 'Agri' and 'Food TopHealth Plants.' The first product group consists of biostimulants for agriculture, a substance used to make soil and crops more resilient to extreme weather conditions and improve nutrient absorption by the crops. The second focus category is food. One of our customers is a hamburger manufacturer replacing part of the meat with our seaweed. As a result, a hamburger contains only three-quarters of the meat it used to have, without altering the taste. Seaweed contains a rich blend of organic proteins, healthy fats, vitamins, and minerals."

Marielle: When I arranged this meeting with Willemijn, she mentioned that she learns new things every day. Can you provide examples of this?

Willemijn: "I had to discover and figure out almost everything myself, from planning, logistics, the order process, quality, to ERP. What requirements apply, for instance, to international shipments, and what documents need to be included? If a recall is necessary, how do we handle that? At Danone, we had done these things thousands of times, but here, I have to figure everything out."

Jojan: Does starting from scratch make it easier to make choices for sustainable partners or processes?

Willemijn: "Our focus is on quality and sustainability throughout the entire chain, from the seaweed farm to the end user. Therefore, our partners must also be sustainable. It's not as simple as it sounds, especially as the market is growing. There is a lot of regulations to comply with, and we set our own quality standards, such as requiring our products to be certified and organic, with suppliers located in Europe. Flexibility is crucial at this stage, where we need to respond quickly to customer needs and market demands. For example, we adjust the size of our seaweed particles based on customer feedback."

Jojan: We read that you apply life cycle analysis (LCA) to seaweed. Can you tell us more about that?

Willemijn: "LCA is a powerful tool to identify gaps or strengths in your process. We now have someone conducting the LCA for us, providing a full calculation so we can see our impact immediately. We discovered that replacing 25 percent of beef with seaweed per hamburger can offset 8 kilograms of CO₂ emissions and save nearly 1,800 liters of water."

Marielle: How do you match supply and demand in a new chain where there is little data available?

Willemijn: "The challenging part of this process is that we have to collect and analyze data ourselves. We don't have a dedicated data scientist, so there's room for improvement. It's a significant contrast to my previous job at Danone, where we knew exactly how many babies were born, and we could align our production accordingly. Now, we often have too much or too little inventory."

Laura: "We are in constant dialogue with new customers and find that each customer has different expectations and requirements. That's why we work with scenarios to be prepared for everything and identify risks. Working with nature, sometimes a harvest may fall short. Our Irish colleagues also notice a growing interest in seaweed in Ireland, both from suppliers and potential customers. While the focus is currently

on Europe, we are open to potential customers worldwide."


Jojan: You are growing rapidly, and seaweed seems to be gaining traction in the market.

What are the current biggest challenges?
Joost: "Seaweed farmers are currently facing challenging regulations, which vary in each country. Finding fishermen willing to transition to seaweed production is a challenge as they face financial risks. We need to eliminate these uncertainties for our farmers. If we succeed, we can genuinely scale up production. We are constantly looking for financiers willing to cover this financial risk for our farmers."

Jojan: Do you have tips for companies looking to transition to a sustainable supply chain?

Willemijn: "Don't stay behind your desk; engage with sustainable parties looking to innovate. This way, you can discover the essential skills and characteristics needed for establishing sustainable initiatives and connect with inspiring people. And above all, don't overthink it; just do it!"

Marielle: Lastly, what is your dream for the future?

Joost: "Our dream is to truly impact the food value chain with our products. This chain needs healing, and we can't do it alone. We hope that, in five years, it will be normal to eat a hybrid hamburger consisting of a quarter seaweed. Not only in the Netherlands but worldwide. If that happens, the market will be too vast for us to serve alone, so I hope we can share our knowledge with many companies to meet the demand together." 

"Our focus is on quality and sustainability throughout the entire chain"



Ready,
set,
go!



A talent doesn't develop on its own



Together, we
develop the supply
chain leaders of the
future