

May 8, 2006
Section: Page One
Page: 1A

All-organic landscape a goal for Kettle Foods

Salem company also is state's second to be Salmon-Safe

BY BETH CASPER

Statesman Journal

"Organic" is no longer a term used solely for some of the ingredients Kettle Foods uses in its chips.

The snack-food factory is on track to be the first corporation in the state to have an all-organic landscape, which means no chemicals are used.

The result: a healthier place for employees who eat lunch outside, fish and amphibians in nearby Mill Creek and wildlife searching for food in the area, said Jim Green of Kettle Foods and the consultant the company is using, Jim Toler of Willamette Organics.

As if to make the point, two Canada geese waddled across the lawn and gobbled down some green grass as a blue heron sat perched over its nest and two babies.

The one-acre campus surrounding the offices and plant features a manicured green lawn and beds of irises, bunch grasses, Japanese maples and other bushes.

It's not a place laden with pesticides and fertilizers; Jim Bartus of JB Landscape Maintenance cut the chemical use on the campus in half two years ago.

But no one could call it organic.

Now, with the help of Willamette Organics, Kettle Foods is changing that.

"This is something we have talked about for some time," Green said. "We do this in our food products by asking how can we use more organic products, use less processed food or more local products. But hey, what about outside the building?"

The transition to organic fits into another certification Kettle Foods earned recently.

It is the second corporation in the state - Nike is the other - to earn the Salmon-Safe certification, which means that practices on the grounds of Kettle Foods enhance fish habitat.

In March, a stormwater-management expert, a salmon biologist and a pesticide expert certified Kettle Foods.

"The Salmon-Safe certification demonstrates their commitment to restore their own backyard - which is home to Chinook, steelhead and cutthroat trout," Dan Kent of Portland-based Salmon-Safe said about Mill Creek, which runs next to Kettle Foods.

The Salmon-Safe certification does not require organic practices, but they fit perfectly with protecting fish that can be harmed by pesticides, Kent said.

The organic practices create healthy soil, Toler said about Salem-based Willamette Organics. The company was formed in 2003 to provide education, products and services to farmers, nurserymen, landscapers and home gardeners to eliminate toxic management practices.

"Any time the soil is treated with artificial fertilizers or exposed to pesticides, there is damage to the biology of the soil," Toler said.

To build back a healthy soil, Toler uses compost tea - a watery extract of nutrients and microorganisms from compost. The organisms include bacteria and fungi.

Toler also takes soil samples from the lawn and garden beds to evaluate the soil composition.

Kettle Foods has paid \$7,000 for the first year of work with Willamette Organics and \$3,000 for the applications of compost tea. Toler also has given the company an organic-practices plan. The transition time to organic certification could be one to five years, Toler said.

"We should see better drought tolerance, fewer instances of disease and possibly less problems with insects and weeds," Toler said of going organic.

Bartus of JB Landscape - Kettle Foods' landscape company - said he has been attending seminars and reading books about the organic practices. He plans to launch an organic-gardening division of his company next year.

In the meantime, learning new techniques for the soil can be daunting, he acknowledged.

"I've been in the business 20 years and this is all new to me," he said. "But I have this vision for Kettle Foods of the lawn and gardens glowing with health. We'll be there in a year or two."

The latest landscape efforts by Kettle Foods follow a long line of environmental practices, including wetland restoration, biodiesel use and investments in solar power. But it also comes on the heels of a recent \$12,000 city penalty for dumping prohibited wastes in Mill Creek.

bcasper@StatesmanJournal.com or (503) 589-6994