

# Sunshin

Sportsman's Friend & Go

by Clarke C. Jones

**W**hen I was growing up, every night after dinner I would routinely scrape what little bits were left on my plate into my two beagles' bowls of dry dog food. I thought I was doing them a big favor, believing that they certainly showed their appreciation by wolfing down those scraps, sort of "feeding them like family" long before it became a tag line in a dog food commercial. Little did I know then that giving dogs certain human foods could have put their health in jeopardy. Over time, I learned that not everything a dog will eat (and I have seen dogs eat most anything) is good for it and some human foods can actually poison a dog—chocolate, raisins, grapes, and onions, to name a few. Luckily, my beagles did not appear to suffer any problems from the chicken bones, pork, and whatever else I added to their chow.

For dogs, as for people, the ingredients in food are essential for stimulating growth as well as ensuring a quality life. Hunters, field trialers, and working dog owners have an additional requirement that dogs consume appropriate essential nutrients in order to maintain exceptional levels of stamina and performance during challenging weather and other demanding situations.

Dog food is a purchaser-driven business. Your domesticated, well trained dog can't go to the store and buy food, of course. As reported by the Pet Food Institute, dog food sales in 2013 reached almost 14 billion dollars, with far more choices available than ever before. Not only does the final decision rest on what the dog will actually eat, the food must also appeal to the eyes, nose, and budget of the owner who serves it. That's why there are so many formulations.



Vizsla ©Dwight Dyke



# e MILLS

## Food Corporate Citizen

Recently, I met with Larry Holt, plant manager of Sunshine Mills, Inc. in Halifax, and Philip Bates, vice-president of manufacturing from their corporate office in Red Bay, Alabama. Sunshine Mills is a family-owned business which not only produces its own dog foods—such as Hunter's Special, Triumph, and Sportsman's Pride—but approximately 80 additional dog and cat food private-label brands, including several national products. Each brand of dog food has its own formula and specifications.

"We produce everything to AAFCO standards (Association of American Feed Control Officials) and we are one of the few plants that are Level 3 Safe Quality Food (SQF) certified, which is the exact same level for human food consumption. A SQF certification is one of the most recognized certifications for food processing in the world," Bates explains.

I was fortunate to be given an inside look at the Halifax County Division, Dry Pet Food & Biscuit Plant, and observe how some of Sunshine Mills products are made. As is the case with many manufacturing and corporate facilities, no cameras are allowed inside. There are certain rules a visitor must follow even *before* entering the production area: You must wear a hard hat, a beard net, a hair net, as well as wash your hands. Holt instructed me (politely but firmly), "Do *not* touch anything." Upon entering the area, you must step in a tray of a white chalky substance that disinfects whatever is on the bottom of your shoes. The first thing I saw once inside the plant was an employee driving a floor cleaning machine that looked like a modified Zamboni and, according to Holt, the cleaner constantly moves throughout the manufacturing area.

Sunshine Mills recognizes the strong emotional ties that pet owners have with their



Philip Bates (L) is Vice President of Manufacturing for Sunshine Mills in their corporate office in Red Bay, Alabama. Larry Holt (R) is Plant Manager for the Halifax, Virginia operation.

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Freda Rosso and her English setter, Izzy, from the tidewater area, shown here after placing in a National Upland Classics trial that Sunshine Mills supports.

Courtesy of Andrea Statton

pets. The company places tremendous emphasis on the cleanliness of their manufacturing facility and the prevention of contamination in their cat and dog food products by continually training their employees on proper procedures. If for any reason a dog food product touches the floor or a dog food bag is ripped open, it is immediately discarded. Contamination prevention is serious business here.

Larry Holt pointed out another measure the company takes to prevent pet food

contamination. Sunshine Mills does not produce hog, chicken, or other animal feeds at the Halifax plant, only cat and dog food.

"Sunshine Mills is governed and monitored nearly the same as a food manufacturing facility," reports Philip Bates. "We test every ingredient we purchase that comes to our plant *prior* to unloading it." Bates explained that there is a wet chemistry testing lab in Halifax and a corporate lab in Red Bay, Alabama, that work independently from Sunshine Mills. They set up all of the company's





Courtesy of Larry Holt

Shown here, the Sunshine Mills manufacturing plant in Halifax.

protocols and perform split testing to assure identical results. Bates adds that his company is up front about what the protein levels, moisture content, and other requisite standards need to be so once the commodity clears testing, only then it can be used in their manufacturing process.

Sunshine Mills is subject to audits making sure all proper procedures take place on a daily basis. "A Safe Quality Food audit is not something you can prepare for," explains Bates. "We have some very large customers and they have their own standards and ingredient requirements and they can actually come and do an audit at our plant. Our whole intent is to be making quality dog food, so it

does not matter what day an audit takes place."

Bates recommends that the consumer do his/her homework when purchasing dog food and delve beyond the hype of slick ads and marketing. Make sure the food you are purchasing has a guaranteed analysis on the label, but also understand the definitions of what is in that analysis, which can be found on the AAFCO website. Try to learn where key ingredients such as protein come from.

"The nutritional needs of a hunting dog are different depending upon the type of hunting you are doing," Bates affirms. "Also, a dog's formula needs may depend on how often you hunt or work your dog."

If you have an older golden retriever that is a stay-at-home pet most of the time but you both enjoy dove shooting during the first few days in September, the nutritional needs of that dog are not going to be the same as those of a Labrador retriever, who regularly hunts alongside a waterfowl guide, fetching ducks in cold temperatures on the Chesapeake Bay.

Holt advised that if you are going to change a dog's food from one type to another you need to add the new food gradually to food you have been feeding it. "If you swap a dog food all at once, a dog's body is going to react to that." He continues, "The consumer should keep in mind that dogs—like humans—are not the same when it comes to the foods they can eat. Some people can eat anything they want, some cannot. It is the same with dogs."

Halifax Town Manager Carl Espy, IV knows the company is an important asset to

the people of Halifax and the surrounding community and purchases ingredients locally whenever it can. "Their quality product line not only is widely popular with outdoor sportsmen for their hunting breeds, but is sold by locally owned businesses for a variety of pet owners."

The plant partnered with the town when it recently adopted a light pollution management ordinance. Espy praises Sunshine Mills as a good corporate citizen, "While the company has expanded their physical plant and invested significant capital improvements to their operation, Sunshine has worked with the town on our outdoor lighting control requirements and serves as a great role model of industry complying with our 'dark-sky friendly' ordinance."

If you own—or intend to purchase—a pedigreed, highly-trained hunting, field trial, or working dog, you have already figured out that you are making a considerable investment. That investment, coupled with the knowledge that your dog has a limited life span, places an emphasis on maintaining the health and endurance of your hunting companion. Whether through research or experience, the choices you make for your dog's nutrition can make for memorable days in the field or forest or on the water. 🐾

*Clarke C. Jones spends his spare time with his black Labrador retriever, Luke, hunting up good stories. You can visit Clarke and Luke on their website at [www.clarkecjones.com](http://www.clarkecjones.com).*



Courtesy of Jayme Hanzek

Star-gazing enthusiasts ready their equipment, thanks to a dark-friendly sky ordinance that Sunshine Mills endorses.



