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Q&A: Using Algae to Create Sustainable Footwear

By **Andrea Miller**



BLOOM Foam has created the first plant-based, performance-based foam. Its sustainably sourced foam made from algae biomass is used to make shoes, surfboards and more. We spoke with design director Abby Miller about wearing algae.



Q: What is your foam made of? How is it sustainable? What's the process behind your technology?

Abby Miller: BLOOM foam is made from a patented hybrid polymer of algae biomass and EVA. Our foams can contain anywhere between 15% to 60% algae biomass. The sustainability aspect comes from our algae harvesting process: We harvest wild algae from freshwater sources at high risk of algal bloom. Our algae harvesters were originally designed to be used in aquaculture ponds, so it's a safe, noninvasive operation that does not affect wildlife and the local ecology. Our mobile harvesting units suck up algae slurry from the top six inches of the water column and return clean, filtered water back to habitat.

Environmentally speaking, our foams are not the perfect solution (yet). We are constantly working toward that objective, however. As demand grows and companies continue to recognize that environmental stewardship and attaining business objectives are not mutually exclusive, we will be able to do more in terms of expanding our environmental benefits. We are working toward developing 100% biodegradable foams with high algae content. Our lab has achieved this goal as a proof of concept, but currently the cost of producing this technology is too expensive to facilitate mass market adoption. We want to save the world, but we are also realistic about the challenges companies face in adopting new technologies, and what it takes for new product to enter the market. We believe we have reached a balance for what is needed to conduct business today in a responsible manner.

Q: How did your company discover a need for this innovation?

AM: To answer this question, we need to go into how BLOOM was formed. BLOOM is a joint venture between Effekt and ALGIX. Effekt is an environmentally minded materials development company based in San Diego, and ALGIX is the world's largest algae harvester based in Meridian, MS. Rob Falken, managing director of BLOOM and founder of Effekt, developed the algae-based foam as a solution to both our dependence on petrochemical ingredients, and to convert the algal bloom infesting the world's waterways into a useful, renewable feedstock.



Q: How did you partnership with VIVOBAREFOOT start?

AM: Vivo reached out to us after hearing about our collaboration with Slater Designs to produce a surfboard traction pad made exclusively with BLOOM foam.

Q: What is your goal with this partnership?

AM: Vivo and BLOOM are like-minded companies in many ways. Both are young companies driven by innovation, with a sincere desire to disrupt the status quo of our respective industries through environmental responsibility. Thanks to Vivo's involvement and ability to move nimbly, we've been able to move rapidly through R&D and production in a truly disruptive and exciting way.

Q: What do you hope to see in the future of wearable technology innovations?

AM: I do believe there is a growing industry effort toward developing recyclable and biodegradable (or industrially compostable) materials in the manufacture of high-performance goods. Currently, there's a tug between producing sustainable materials that may come with a higher price point or lower quality, and high-performance materials with negative environmental impacts. Whatever the future of wearable technology looks like, I sincerely hope it is driven by environmental awareness and a desire to empower and enrich our global society.



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