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Charles Walser

CEO, Phytaxis, Switzerland

Charles Walser is an accomplished entrepreneur and executive with over 30 years of experience in international business development, financial derivatives, and renewable materials. As a co-founder and managing partner, he has built and successfully exited businesses across the financial and industrial sectors.

In his current role as CEO of Phytaxis SA, Charles drives innovation in the livestock health and performance industry, focusing on reducing antibiotic use and at the same time improve performance. His expertise spans strategy development, product commercialisation, and international project management, with a proven track record in Europe, Asia, and North America.

Charles holds a Master of Arts in Economics from the University of Zurich and is fluent in German and English, with conversational proficiency in French. He is a passionate tennis player, sailor, and cyclist, balancing his professional success with an active lifestyle.

You have a rich career in the industry, what initially led you to this field?

It was back in 2006 when I first encountered a new technology for extracting valuable compounds from agricultural residues, such as wheat straw. Around the same time, the EU implemented a ban on using antibiotics as growth promoters in the livestock industry, giving a significant boost to the phytochemical market. Recognising the potential of one particular compound in this biomass, we initiated studies and trials in collaboration with reputable institutes. The results exceeded our expectations, revealing a broad range of benefits in addressing key challenges in animal husbandry.

Upscaling a product derived from agricultural waste—material that would otherwise be burned and exacerbate the carbon problem—seemed like a win-win opportunity. Not only could we contribute to reducing the overuse of antibiotics, but we could also promote sustainability in the livestock sector.

What are the key benefits of using plant-based ingredients in aquaculture, both for the health of the fish and the sustainability of the industry?

Using our plant-based ingredient offers numerous benefits. With extensive experience in animal health, we decided over two years ago to extend our expertise to the aquaculture industry, focusing initially on tilapia and salmonids like trout. Despite the short timeframe, our trials and commercial applications have demonstrated significant advantages in aquaculture.

Key benefits include reduced antibiotic use, improved growth and feed conversion, lower mortality, enhanced meat quality, better water quality, and reduced ammonia levels. Additionally, plant-based products face fewer regulatory challenges.

In terms of sustainability, we use agricultural residues such as wheat straw, which are otherwise often burned and do not come from the food chain, making our raw material highly sustainable.

What kind of research and development went into creating this ingredient? Can you share any findings from your trials or studies?

We were aware of early publications highlighting the health effects of these isolated molecules. Recognising the need for non-medical products following the AGP ban and having unique ingredients at our disposal, we decided to explore their properties ourselves. We began with toxicological tests and then examined the full spectrum of properties, including antibiotic, antioxidant, and antiviral effects and gathered years of experience in farm animals which we started to bring into the aquaculture market a few years ago.

What impact do you anticipate your ingredient will have on the cost of aquaculture feed, and how might it influence the economics of fish farming?

We anticipate several impacts, particularly on feed costs. Our product improves feed conversion, allowing for reduced protein and energy content in formulations, which significantly lowers feed costs. Enhanced villi size indicates better nutrient absorption, while lower mortality rates and faster achievement of target weights contribute to reduced production costs.

What are your goals for the adoption of this plant-based ingredient in the aquaculture industry, and what further innovations should be explored in the future?

Having initially focused on tilapia and salmonids such as trout, we plan to expand our product line to include a variety of other fish species. We believe that preventive measures, such as the administration of our products, significantly enhances the performance and health of the animals. Our research and development team will continue to explore this direction, developing and launching products that further advance preventive care.

Looking Ahead, what do you foresee as the most significant opportunity and challenge for the aquaculture industry, particularly concerning feed ingredients and fish welfare?

The most significant opportunity lies in leveraging innovative feed additives, like plant-based solutions, to enhance fish health. These additives can reduce the need for medical treatments, lower mortality rates, improve feed conversion efficiency, and ultimately reduce feed costs, addressing key industry challenges while promoting sustainability.

A challenge we should be aware of is about ensuring that these health-targeting feed additives deliver consistent performance across diverse aquaculture systems and species, while meeting regulatory standards and gaining industry adoption, remains a critical challenge that requires robust validation and collaboration.