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For Immediate Release

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SuperZoo Booth #26165

Natural Pet Supplement Pioneer Animal Essentials Marks 20 Years in Business

Herbologist Greg Tilford, company owner and founder of Animals' Apawthecary, maintains emphasis on green, sustainable and ethical business practices.

When herbalist Greg Tilford launched his herbal tincture line for pets in 1995 under Animals' Apawthecary, the U.S. natural animal supplement category totaled just \$2 million per year. Now 20 years later, it's \$1.9 billion. Tilford's product offerings, now under the Animal Essentials brand, have grown and evolved along with the industry, but his original philosophy remains the same: To produce the highest quality, safest and most effective products for animals using ethical and sustainable ingredient sources, benchmarked manufacturing, rigorous testing and green business practices.

"Two decades ago people were just waking up to the link between nutrition and health, and realizing that there were missing components in the low quality kibble mass marketed for pets," says Tilford. He acknowledges that exposés on meat rendering plants, and scares from toxins and adulterants in pet foods like the melamine panic in 2004 pushed the quality issue. Pet owners turned to natural foods, home-prepared diets and supplements.

"Anything that shocks the conscience is powerful, but when it goes to the heart with a family member like a dog or cat, things happen. The natural product industry built up around demand," Tilford adds.

Launching Herbal Supplements

The aha moment for Tilford came out of his work wildcrafting medicinals for the pharmaceutical and nutraceutical industries, his curiosity about the interactions of herbs, and his observations of wild animals self-treating by eating specific plants. He realized that companion animals need natural therapies as well, and there wasn't a single herbal extract line for pets on the market. With feedback from many holistic veterinarians, he developed formulas in a glycerin base rather than alcohol for palatability, and a proprietary extraction process for potency.

Animals' Apawthecary launched with Detox Blend as his first product, a liver formula requested by vets that resulted in clinical results, improved blood panels and enthusiastic feedback. He soon developed

Tinkle Tonic for urinary tract support, still his most popular tincture remedy. Now the line has 17 unique solutions-oriented combination formulas, as well as nearly 40 single herb extracts, more than any pet supplement company in the world. And it remains the most popular liquid herbal choice among veterinarians, says Tilford.

As product formulator for other companies, Tilford developed Plant Enzymes & Probiotics and other supplements for Merritt Naturals, and the companies merged in 2001 to form Animal Essentials with Animals' Apawthecary as one of the product lines. The enzyme product, launched in 1999 with only human-grade ingredients, is a recognized segment leader, and is the company's top-selling product. "Consumers and retailers trust the product because of the purity, quality, accountability to source and track record," he says.

Now Animal Essentials, based in Victor, Montana, offers 47 products and more than 100 SKUs including all bottle sizes. The products treat acute pet health problems, address specific issues and support body functions to ensure ongoing pet wellness. Tilford says that today consumers are well educated on health and often know exactly what they need for their animals. And veterinarians are more open to recommending herbs and supplements over medications.

Need for Sustainable Sourcing

The increased natural supplement demand has put stress on specific plants and fisheries. With his career start in herbal wildcrafting, Tilford is adamant that all ingredients in his products are sustainably harvested. "We nearly lost native goldenseal and American ginseng entirely due to over-harvesting," he says.

On the plant side, Tilford supports cultivated certified organic herbs, although a few ingredients are still wild harvested. Each ingredient has unique sourcing issues, he explains. For example, passionflower is only wild harvested in France, myrrh gum is only harvested in Africa, couchgrass only comes from Albania and big companies contract most of the organic yucca root. It's harder to source soy lecithin without GMO impurities.

The marine-based ingredients get the same green and sustainable scrutiny from Animal Essentials. "Marine resources are rapidly depleting," says Tilford. For instance, the population of spawning herring in the Northern Pacific has dropped 92 percent over the last 40 years.

"We found a Norwegian fish oil supplier with the environmentally sensitive practices we admire, working a healthy fishery," Tilford says. Both Ocean Omega Gold Fish Oil Soft Gels and Ocean Omega Supreme Fish Oil incorporate a variety of fish species such as anchovies, herring, jacks, smelts and mackerel to minimize harvest pressure on any single species. This also improves ingredient Omega-3 ratios, he adds.

"It's taken 20 years to develop our ingredient supply sources," says Tilford, adding that his suppliers adhere to the same exacting environmental and quality standards he demands for his products. In the era of global sourcing, he says it's more important than ever to know the integrity of suppliers, to verify quality controls, and to insist on extensive ingredient and finished product testing.

Manufacturing Quality

Company suppliers have documented quality control processes with certificates of analysis. Ingredients must be tested for identity, pathogenic microbes, heavy metals and other contaminants. Once company products are formulated, an independent lab tests every batch prior to packaging and issues a Certificate

of Analysis. As an additional quality check, an independent lab verifies the Certificates of Analysis on a sampling basis.

“Manufacturing quality is equally as important as ingredient quality,” says Tilford, adding all products are human-grade. They meet or exceed the standards set by the National Animal Supplement Council (NASC), as well as the FDA for the human food industry and over-the-counter drug industry. Animal Essentials holds a Certificate of Best Manufacturing Practices from NASC based on regular audits. The company complies with the USDA’s National Organic Program Standards and has an Organic Handler Certificate from the Montana Department of Agriculture. It also holds Green Business Certification from Green America.

A Recognized Pioneer

Thanks to Tilford’s expertise developed over 20 years in the industry, he’s considered an industry elder or go-to resource. He has been a scientific advisor to NASC since its inception, and founded and chairs the Animal Products Committee of the American Herbal Products Association. He published a reference book, *Herbs for Pets, the Natural Way to Enhance your Pet’s Life* (i-5 Publications, second ed. 2009) to provide helpful information. And he lectures at major pet trade shows, consumer events and veterinary schools.

Being a trusted source of knowledge on herbs and natural supplements for pets is a source of pride for Tilford. “It feels good to be recognized for the pioneering work we’ve done in this field,” he says.

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