Agrivair, a subsidiary of Nestlé Waters France dedicated to the protection of natural springs


In the 1980s in France, particularly in the Vosges region, the protection of natural springs and of the land* where they were located became a priority for Nestlé Waters France. In this context, taking into account the specific features of the Vosges area, the company decided it was necessary first to examine under what conditions local development could be reconciled with protection of the springs.

To answer this question, Nestlé Waters France by launching a partnership with the French National Institute for Agricultural Research (INRA), a wide interdisciplinary research programme involving historians, sociologists, economists, agronomists and zootechnicians. A subsidiary of Nestlé Waters France, AGRIVAIR was set up in 1992 as a result of this innovative, cross-disciplinary approach.

Agrivair’s main mission: to anticipate and avoid any risk of altering the quality and original purity of the natural mineral waters of VITTEL, CONTREX and HEPAR.

Agrivair works at 3 levels: agricultural, urban and industrial.

* Impluviums or catchment basins

Combining local economy and environment

Enabling human activity in harmony with soil protection... a challenge that Agrivair and its partners have successfully met. And a guarantee for Nestlé Waters France of lasting natural springs in the Vosges region.

Reconciling local economic development with lasting sources of VITTEL, CONTREX and HEPAR is an ambitious approach. Its success rests on the interdisciplinary, partnership-based approach adopted in this programme, which gave rise to Agrivair, uniting around it farmers and businesses, local authorities and residents as well as horticulturists, landscape designers, park managers and the French national railway SNCF.

Reconciling the protection of subsoils with agricultural practices

Agrivair action, the fruit of constructive collaboration between Nestlé Waters France and farmers located in the area of impluviums, has enabled a sustainable change in agricultural practices.

Agrivair arose out of the need to preserve underground mineral waters. This is a fundamental mission, which means rolling out alternative agricultural practices supported by an eliminating policy of the use of pesticides.

Collaboration based on discussion was set up between Agrivair and local farmers to explain and provide convincing grounds for introducing alternative practices and gradually abandoning the use of pesticide products.

The farmers committed themselves to implementing the new practices over a period of 18 or 30 years by applying precise specifications. In exchange, Agrivair offered them technical and financial support during the process of change.

This “environmental contract” has enabled a “zero pesticide” policy to be rolled out and alternative methods to be put in place, such as using compost, rotating crops, reintroducing the cultivation of alfalfa instead of corn and requiring farm buildings to be certified to environmental standards.

Today, the farmers located within the scope of Agrivair intervention employ highly respectful methods in cultivating their lands, thereby ensuring the sustainability of the region’s mineral water resources. More than 90% of farmland in the region enjoys the protection of this “contract”.

An overall approach to risk prevention

Sustainable protection of impluviums, supported by anticipation, advice and action.

Anticipation

Thanks to its expertise in natural spring protection and its 15-year track record of action, Agrivair has generated genuine prevention engineering. It has defined a methodology for anticipating and classifying risks, which helps prevent any potential alteration of the mineral water purity.

Advice

Agrivair plays an advisory and coordinating role, especially in the field of agronomics, and engages as well with the different local organisations. It thereby facilitates the creation of new channels, such as the introduction of green product collection in the city of Vittel and its composting collective.

Agrivair also intervenes in designing protected areas for high-risk activities (oil changes, maintenance requiring the use of hazardous products, etc.) and wherever new forms of upkeep are introduced for parks and athletic fields.

Action

Agrivair is involved in daily actions to safeguard natural springs. For instance, it supports private customers in the replacement of buried oil cisterns by gas installations, it participates in railway track maintenance using a thermal weeding process instead of chemical products and in selective collection of hazardous products.

A model of sustainable management of water resources

Starting from its initial experiment in the agricultural field, Agrivair has developed an approach based on the “Research-Action” principle:

- Studying and comprehension of agrarian systems and their consequences
- Analysing the conditions for change
- Proposing new practices
- Experimenting tools and monitoring indicators to support change
- Developing

Today, this approach is applied in all areas of Agrivair intervention.
Rules dictated by Nature

Within the scope of its “zero pesticide” policy, Agrivair is intervening in the overall ecosystem, with a special emphasis of maintaining biodiversity.

Since its creation, the Nestlé Waters France subsidiary has been working with partners specialising in nature, such as the Regional Department of Plant Protection, INRA and the Bird Protection League to validate its recommendations scientifically. Collaboration between Agrivair and the Bird Protection League has resulted in reintroducing birds of prey at the Vittel racecourse to combat rodents that were damaging the racetracks. This practice is an effective alternative chemical method.

Future-oriented projects

Sustainability also means preparing for the future: by helping farmers in the Vosges region to grow new plants, Agrivair is pursuing its action based on diversification.

Diversification, which entails introducing the cultivation of new plants, has been identified as one of the strategic stakes in the region’s economic and environmental future. For example, by supporting the growing of hemp, which has a variety of possible outlets, Agrivair is contributing to the crop-rotation system already in place. Another recent initiative: planting apple orchards to yield fruit to be used in food production by the Baby Food division of the Nestlé Group.

While Agrivair’s success stems from its unique, scientific approach, it is also closely linked to the adaptive capacity of all the local players and partners who have been involved since its creation in ensuring it that VITTEL, CONTREX and HEPAR natural springs continue to be preserved.

key figures

- Incorporation in 1992
- Nearly 10,000 hectares protected
- 95% of the VITTEL impluvium protected
- 90% of the CONTREX impluvium protected
- 15 staff members dedicated to protecting VITTEL, CONTREX and HEPAR natural springs
- 200 people directly involved in Agrivair actions