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All work and no play

There's a lot of work going into workwear and uniform fabrics these days. Just like the men and women who must wear these garments day in and day out, fabrics must perform consistently and do a lot of tough jobs, often under extreme conditions.

A prime example would be the varied array of garments worn by America's National Park Service, a force that serves some 390 areas in all sorts of weather and terrain. Some 17,000 full-time, part-time and seasonal employees are at work in the National Park System. Whether the uniforms they wear are the basic outfit of the day or something much more technical, fabric and apparel requirements are decidedly more stringent than just a few years ago.

No one knows this better than Ramie Lynch, NPS uniform coordinator.

"Parks range the entire gamut of terrain with great diversity in climates that can go to extremes ranging from the cold of Alaska to the hot arid region of Death Valley," Lynch says. "It's a big challenge to outfit that work force."

That challenge must be met with ever-present budget constraints in play, so Lynch and his staff must stretch taxpayers' dollars a long way. With an annual clothing budget of just $5.1 million, it is often a long stretch. Employees receive an individual annual budget of $320 to $400 per year, depending on their duties. They select products from the NPS clothing catalogue.



National Park Service Summer Field uniform.

National Park Service



Burlington Raeford specialises in premium uniform fabrics.

Burlington Worldwide

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Specialised fabrics have evolved that offer several elements of protection: For industry combinations of flame retardant, antistatic, and high visibility properties along with finishes that resist soiling, chemicals and oils; In healthcare and other critical hygiene sectors, fabrics with an antimicrobial finish help prevent harmful bacteria from proliferating, mutating or being transmitted.

Klopman International

"For the past few years, we've been looking at the latest innovations in the industry, testing different fabrics and different weaves," Lynch says. "Over the years we've been slowly but surely updating all our garments. We want to provide our employees with the proper tools to do their jobs."

An example of a recent addition to the catalogue is a polyester-spandex turtleneck by Elbeco that is wickable, breathes, has an anti-microbial finish, is odour resistant and helps regulate body temperature.

"It's kind of techie," Lynch says. "We've also recently added a balaclava made of the same type of material. There's a lot of cutting edge stuff in the market."

Employees often provide great suggestions for specific types of performance characteristics to add to their work wardrobes, he says. Lynch cites Thinsulate as a top performance product that offers value with its tightness of weave, and Gore-Tex for outerwear.

Imagewear, a division of the major VF Group, is one of the largest manufacturers of uniforms in the US and provides products to the NPS, the Border Patrol, Customs agents and many other government agencies. In fact, the NPS uniform contract specifically requires that the contractor must seek out the latest technologies for clothing and outerwear. Each garment must pass a 60 to 90-day wear test.

Burlington Worldwide serves markets in the sector on the career apparel end of the business, with end users including airlines, hotels and resorts. Frank Bakirdan, Burlington's vice president sales and marketing for worsted wool and synthetic fabrics, says there has been a definite move to lighter weight garments offering more of a retail look and feel.

"It's not the traditional uniform fabrics most people are accustomed to," Bakirdan says. "There's a trade-off, however, when you switch from the heavy yarn and go finer: its durability. But the end users are willing to make that trade off to wear something more fashionable."

Major airlines are using uniforms made of a 55-45 per cent polyester-wool blend. Bakirdan says wool is used for its natural attributes such as its ability to absorb 30 per cent of its weight in moisture and its wrinkle recovery capabilities. The primary performance attribute being added is stain repellency, through nano-technology, he says.

A much smaller niche market is in upscale Las Vegas casinos and small privately held hotels which provide their front desk personnel with an updated, trendy look using 100 per cent wool garments.

The police uniform market is Burlington's largest and these uniforms are usually either 100 per cent polyester or a 55-45 poly-wool blend.

"We have a very strong presence in the marketplace for poly-wools," Bakirdan says. "The biggest reason for the use of wool is tradition and there are still a lot of people who have a negative connotation of polyester."

The company's Burlington Labs division is responsible for its latest innovations including a mosquito repellent technology, No Fly Zone, which will be marketed to police departments as

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well as the military, Bakirdan says.

"We're getting great feedback from wear trials and we feel strongly about this technology which is bonded molecularly to the core of fibres through nanotechnology."

Mark Cabral, president of Alamac Knits, a diverse North Carolina manufacturer that serves a variety of large workwear companies, says today's workwear must really go to work. He says demand is great for value-added performance features.

"One of the biggest trends involves performance and styling," Cabral says. "Users are looking for more product durability, including colour retention. Everyone is very aware of the need for comfort control, moisture management properties and coolness and warmth factors."

Cabral says the market segment continues to grow, especially as the US evolves into more of a service society. He says there is a natural comfort factor with knits. Alamac serves all the market's end uses, including fabrics that go into workwear tops such as polos or colour-placket type shirts for the industrial laundering market, home wash, national accounts and direct sales.

The workwear sector is also more aware of styling, Cabral says, and demand is great for variety.

"It's not just the typical navy and khaki-type uniforms, but products are more in line with what you see in the general retail market and the same performance characteristics are required, including antimicrobial properties, odour control and fire retardancy. There's a whole line of added performance features the market is demanding. Moisture management is an especially big item."

Depending on the targeted markets, Alamac uses 100 per cent polyester, poly-cotton blends and 100 per cent cotton in its fabrics.

Another trend observed by Cabral and others in the industry is the move to tagless shirts. Elbeco, which supplies uniforms to police departments and the US Postal Service, recently introduced tagless technology to polo shirts worn by letter carriers. Instead of the traditional cloth or paper tag, which can be a major irritant to the backs of necks, Elbeco uses a UV screen in the collar.

Klopman International, Europe's largest and perhaps most diverse workwear specialist, has been at the forefront of many technological developments through the decades. Among the company's recent innovations are products aimed at the women's workwear market in service sectors such as leisure, health and beauty, retail, hospitality, catering and healthcare. Consort, a twill garment, and Regency, a panama garment, each have generous stretch properties built into the fabric for extra comfort and performance benefits. Both are 60 per cent cotton 40 per cent polyester blends – the high cotton content combining exceptional breathability and absorption characteristics – giving enhanced comfort and coolness in wear.

Klopman says that for designers, the fabrics offer greater styling possibilities for tunics, trousers, tabards, dresses, jackets, shirts and coats. The fabrics' soft hand and drape and distinctive weave help to enhance the 'feel good' factor of the wearers, both in terms of extra comfort and projecting a highly individualistic look. The 'stretch and recover' characteristics of Consort and Regency make garments less restricting to wear and less prone to creasing. These qualities help ensure that they keep their shape for far longer, thereby enhancing the garment's appearance.

