RISE TO THE CHALLENGE: THE NORTH FACE AND UNIFI

The US brand's iconic Denali jacket is now utilising three of Unifi's greenest processes, and it has improved manufacturing output in the process.

The North Face boosts green credentials

Since converting its popular Denali jacket to Repreve over standard yarn in 2009, The North Face (TNF) has saved an estimated 150 million plastic bottles from landfill. But, as part of an increasing commitment towards sustainable sourcing - through which it is committed to only using recycled polyester by 2016 - it decided to increase the garment's 'green' credentials through a partnership with yarn-maker Unifi. The jacket has been updated to include two extra yarn technologies from the Repreve family: WaterWise and Takeback, a move launched at the recent Outdoor Retailer Trade Show in Salt Lake City.

"We are always looking for innovative ways to make better products and minimise our environmental impact," says Adam Mott, TNF's director of sustainability. "This partnership allowed us to eliminate waste in our manufacturing and significantly reduce the water and energy required to make one of our most iconic products."

To make Repreve, fibre is extruded from recycled bottles, textured and subsequently knitted into fabrics. This offsets the need to use newly refined crude oil for virgin polyester and the company estimates for every pound of Repreve, 23,000 British Thermal Units are saved, the energy equivalent of 0.2 gallons of gasoline, compared with making virgin synthetic fibres. Solid colourways of the Denali fabric, produced by Polartec, are derived from 87% recycled content while heather colourways use 65% recycled content. This recycled material is made from 90% post-industrial waste and 10% post-consumer waste. With Fiberprint technology, a proprietary signature that every Repreve fibre has, Unifi can help companies verify that Repreve is in their products, and in the right amounts.

"People are amazed that bottles can be recycled into cool stuff they wear and use every day," says Jay Hertwig, Unifi's vice-president of global branding. "With 70% of Americans claiming it's important to buy products made with recycled materials, environmental responsibility is becoming a key point of concern among consumers."



The North Face has integrated environmentally friendly Repreve materials made by Unifi into its Denali jackets.

The North Face

In 2013, Unifi became the first yarn manufacturer to earn Responsible Source certification from certification body SCS Global Services, a mark of environmental and social responsibility in production.

Off-cuts

An interesting new part of the tie-up from an economic standpoint is the value of Unifi's Takeback system. Traditionally, when the jackets were constructed at the TNF's supplier

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The North Face's fabric scraps find a new lease of life through the Takeback programme.
The North Face

factory, 15% of the fabric was wasted as off-cuts. However, using the Unifi technology, it is now collected and sent to a recycling centre in Yadkinville, North Carolina, where the fabric scraps are broken down by a mechanical process (chopping rather than using chemicals) to create a new fibre that can be blended with Repreve. This creates a saving of an astonishing 40% in terms of manufacturing – four extra Denali jackets can be made from every 10 produced. Therefore, the costs associated with sending fabric and recycling the yarn can be weighed against the extra material created.

Black and grey jackets are now being made with this process. "Because we collect and mix various colour scraps together, the Takeback fabrics are mechanically recycled and create black and grey yarns," explains Mr Hertwig.

The black and grey jackets also contain WaterWise yarn with colour technology, which reduces the amount of water and chemicals used in the fabric dyeing process. The black and heather grey jackets made with this yarn use 50% less water, 50% fewer chemicals and 25% less energy in the fabric dyeing and finishing process than a standard jacket. "Coloured chips are added during the Repreve yarn production, melting concentrated colour into the polymer. As the filament is extruded, the colour becomes part of the fibre. No dye bath is needed, so less water is wasted in the process," he adds.

The Takeback programme was launched in 2011 with the building of the 50,000 square foot, $8 million site, and has since been expanded into categories such as furnishings, automotive, healthcare and hospitality. In that time, it has created three million pounds of fabric that would otherwise have been lost to landfill. Other brands participating in the programme include Swedish outdoor brand Norrona and furniture maker Steelcase.

"These collaborations are important because they provide sustainable solutions for our customers and help demonstrate Unifi's commitment to the environment," adds Mr Hertwig.

Bottle washing

Textile Takeback is only available in the Americas due to the location of the recycling centre, although the group says it will "strive to offer the programme in other areas" as demand grows. Plans also include increasing texturing capacity in the US and Central America this year to serve the growing demand for synthetic yarns in the CAFTA region. "Because of the continued success and expected growth of Repreve, we will also continue exploring backward integration opportunities into bottle washing," said CEO Roger Berrier. Sales for the first quarter of the year, which ended September 28, rose 3.3% to $174.2 million, while second quarter sales were up 1.6% to $163.1 million.

"We are continuing to expand the process for making Repeve, engineering new ways to recycle materials throughout the supply chain," concludes Mr Hertwig. "We are proud to provide our customers with sustainable solutions for recycling their own waste into new products, whether it's bottles or fabric scraps."

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