SUSTAINABILITY: FARM TO FEET

Though they be but small, socks can make a huge impact — on feet, on the supply chain, and on the environment. Farm to Feet is a brand built on the importance of all three.



Why socks matter

by Shari Shallard

The first time Steven Clay hiked a segment of the Appalachian Trail he wore standard cotton sports socks. By the end of his first day he was deeply regretting his choice. "I learned the hard way," he tells *WSA*. "By the end of that first day, I had blisters everywhere, I was losing a toenail — and we still had two days to go."

Mr Clay has casually enjoyed the outdoors his whole life, but he recently decided to embark on the ambitious goal of section-hiking the famous 2,175 miles (3500 kilometres) trail that runs from Georgia to Maine. "I realised I was getting older and there were some things I wanted to do — spending more time outside was one of them. I'd forever tried to get my family to go hiking or camping and finally it occurred to me: I'll do it by myself. I'll hike the Appalachian Trail."

Research helped him figure out his packing needs, which essentially include the lightest versions possible of food and shelter. But experience taught him about socks.

"I'd been hiking around the neighbourhood," he says, "and had hotspots developing on my feet. But nothing like what I got from my first full day on the Appalachian Trail. Every time we stopped to eat, I'd have to take off my socks and shoes and put on new bandaids."

Mr Clay recalls his friend, an experienced hiker who had joined him for this inaugural hike, looking on sympathetically. "'Man,' he said to me, 'you gotta wear wool socks so your feet can breathe.'"

The friend was right. When he got back home, Mr Clay transformed his choice of footwear. Undeterred by those raw feet of his first outing, he was soon back on the trail — this time with socks containing wool.

As a financial advisor, volleyball coach, husband, and father of two, it's challenging for

(From left to right) The Damascus hiking sock is the company's most popular and has inspired several variations.

Graphics on the newest sock, Cascade Locks, depict Cascades Rapids, Oregon.

The Blue Ridge was a collaboration with Jennifer Pharr Davis, who set the record for fastest known time on the Appalachian Trail.

Farm to Feet

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Using entirely US-based materials, manufacturing, and employees is fundamental to the Farm to Feet brand.

A Farm to Feet knitted sock is aligned for seamless toe closure.

Farm to Feet

Mr Clay to make time for his three-day hikes. Thus far, however, he has managed to put almost 125 miles of Georgia and North Carolina trail beneath his feet.

Farm to Feet, makers of technical wool socks, understand people like Mr Clay. This drive — this compulsion to push through the blisters and tight schedules to spend hours, days, countless miles immersed in some of the US's most beautiful natural settings — is exactly what Farm to Feet speaks to. Socks are the product, of course, but the brand is about celebrating high-quality wool, US resources, and the manifold environments in which the socks are intended to be worn.

Socks that celebrate the outdoors

"We are firm believers in wool," Anna Draughn, Farm to Feet's wholesale merchandise manager, tells *WSA*. "Wool's natural performance properties make it perfect for almost every activity. It insulates in cooler temperatures and on warm days it breathes, wicks, and helps regulate temperatures."

Merino wool is a resilient fibre, another reason it is ideal for demanding physical activity such as multi-day outings. It dries relatively quickly, and — despite some products giving wool an itchy reputation — merino wool has long, soft fibres that feel lovely against the skin. In addition to merino wool, the nylon content allows structure and durability while reinforcing high-impact areas such as the heel and toe, and spandex gives socks the stretch to ensure a snug fit.

Farm to Feet designers are also firm believers in socks as a lifestyle choice.

A quick scan of the names of Farm to Feet socks is like a survey of the American outdoors. Cedar Falls is a heavyweight wader, named for the Iowa city where people might find themselves fishing or hunting in sub-zero weather. Park City is a midweight ski sock named for the beloved Utah skiing town. Max Patch is a hiking sock named for a popular day-hike destination on the Appalachian Trail, and Damascus is a lightweight hiking sock named for a Virginia town on the Appalachian Trail that is particularly popular with hikers.

The Damascus, according to Ms Draughn, is one of the most popular styles. "We spent a lot of time developing this sock to ensure that its comfort and performance attributes were spot-on. The result is a sock that fits great and has lots of innovative ventilation and cushioning built in that can handle the demands of the trail day after day," she says.

Designed specifically for hikers, the Damascus has targeted full-density padding for protection against blisters, seamless toe closure, micro-channel circumferential ventilation, targeted hexagonal reinforcement, and compression. The super-fine 19.5-micron merino wool naturally staves off the build-up of odour-causing bacteria.

Many of the socks have whimsical designs capturing snapshots of the outdoors. The Emeryville lightweight crew is an everyday sock with a cheeky fox peeking out; Cascade Locks features a rendering of the lovely Cascades Rapids in Oregon; the Floyd is a lightweight crew with musical notes passing over tall pines, named for the FloydFest music festival, held every year in the Blue Ridge Mountains.

"We have a great team of people that have a lot of fun designing these socks," says Ms Draughn. "All our socks are named for places that we have a tie to — an athlete, an organisation, a supply chain factory location. Sometimes the design is informed by the location. Elkin Valley, for example, is a section of the Mountains to Sea

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Trail, which has a big drop in elevation; this inspired the topographical map rings."

Sometimes the design comes from collaboration. The Blue Ridge was developed with Jennifer Pharr Davis, who set a record in 2011 for the Fastest Known Time on the Appalachian Trail (just 46 days). Intended in part to bring greater awareness of the Blue Ridge Mountains, the Blue Ridge is modelled on the Damascus (said to be Ms Pharr Davis' favourite hiking sock) but features the silhouette of a lone hiker against a backdrop of mountains, trees, and a rising sun.

"Both socks are based on the American Trail Series, celebrating trail towns or milestones that outdoorists recognise and love," says Ms Draughn. She adds that partnering with Ms Pharr Davis, who is also an author, a mother, founder of Blue Ridge Hiking Company, and a National Geographic Adventurer of the Year, "was a great opportunity for us to get the brand in front of her core audience at her book signings. Jennifer has also been invaluable with her feedback on product and ideas for improving our hiking collection."

While Mr Clay has not yet had an opportunity to wear the Blue Ridge on the Appalachian Trail, he has spent time with them locally and is impressed. "The sock hits all the right spots for hikers," he says. "Cushion in the right places, no seams, and of course the material [merino wool] is a must."

He adds that the personal touch of the collaboration with Jennifer Pharr Davis makes the Blue Ridge sock particularly resonant with him. "The emphasis on designing these for Appalachian Trail hiking and partnering with a record-setting through-hiker really taps into a personal connection with the Appalachian Trail."

The Farm in Farm to Feet

Farm to Feet considers its supply chain to be another key part of that personal connection to consumers. The provenance of its wool is part of the brand's all-American-sourced identity.

All Farm to Feet socks are made using merino wool grown by American Sheep Industry ranchers. Wool is processed into clean wool top by Chargeurs Wool in Jamestown, South Carolina, then spun into yarn by spinners including Kent Wool in Pickens, South Carolina, and National Spinning in Burlington, North Carolina. Yarn then goes to the sustainability-focused manufacturing facility in Mount Airy, North Carolina, where it is knitted into socks.

The company is proud of its 100% US materials (including not just American-grown wool and American-sourced nylon and elastic, but even the paper and inks used in packaging), 100% US manufacturing, and 100% US workers. This transparent, fully domestic supply chain ensures optimal quality control, while minimising environmental impact.



Steven Clay, a financial advisor by day, is 125 miles into section-hiking the Appalachian Trail.

Steven Clay

The company weaves sustainable messaging and practices into its marketing and distribution in small ways as well. Care instructions on socks include this statement: "To maintain the durability [of socks] and reduce energy use, machine wash in cold water and line dry or tumble dry with no heat." When shopping on the company website, consumers are offered the option of buying the product locally and 20% of the proceeds from the Conservation Alliance sock go toward supporting conservation efforts.

And, as Ms Draughn points out, the mere act of choosing to purchase high-quality wool socks can be an environmentally-sound choice. "Once on your feet there are several other ways the socks lead to eco-friendliness," she says. "Using cold water to wash and then hang-drying reduces energy usage at home. And, because they are wool they are naturally odour resistant, so you can wear them multiple days without needing to wash them."

Socks are vital

Specialised socks exist in a highly symbiotic space: destinations that demand adequate socks are beautiful and compelling enough to inspire extreme efforts by professionals and weekend warriors alike. At the same time, the socks must be durable and supportive enough to make that effort worthwhile.

With high-quality materials, names and aesthetics imbued with the spirit of the outdoors, and a business model built around sustainability, Farm to Feet socks fully celebrate the environments for which they're meant to be worn.

"Socks are vital," Mr Clay says. "If you're on the AT and you get blisters, you might have ten miles before you can do anything about it. I'm telling you, if your feet aren't well, it is miserable. Those wool socks make a difference."

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