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Going chemical-free in your clothing is getting easier

By Tom Watson

Special to The Seattle Times

Your clothes may have a chemical-dependency problem.

The cotton in your shirt was likely grown with a strong dose of pesticides and chemical fertilizers. Many synthetic fabrics such as nylon, acrylic and polyester are petroleum-based.

But it's getting easier for consumers to break the habit, as more clothing made from organic cotton or renewable and reused fabrics hits store shelves and the Internet.

Q: Why should I be concerned about chemicals used to make my clothes?

A: We probably won't experience any ill effects from these chemicals when we wear the clothes. It's the farmers or factory workers and their families, usually thousands of miles away, who face the greatest risk.

About half the pesticides used to grow cotton globally are classified as hazardous, according to the London-based Environmental Justice Foundation (EJF). Children commonly suffer from pesticide poisoning because of the closeness of their homes to cotton fields and the reuse of empty pesticide containers.

The environment pays a price as well. Hazardous cotton pesticides have contaminated rivers in India, Pakistan, Uzbekistan, Brazil, Australia, Greece, Western Africa and the U.S., says the EJF. Petroleum used in synthetic fabrics contributes to global warming.

Q: Hasn't the cotton industry reduced its use of pesticides?

A: Since 1996, the global environmental impact of insecticides used on cotton has decreased nearly 25 percent due to the development of genetically modified, insect-resistant cotton, says the industry organization Cotton Inc. However, some researchers have concerns about long-term effects of genetically engineered crops.

Three percent of the world's agricultural land and 8 percent of all pesticides are used for cotton production, Cotton Inc. says. Some environmental groups claim the percentage of pesticides used for cotton is much higher.

Q: So where can consumers find clothing without the chemicals?

A: Although sustainable clothes are more available these days, locating them still requires legwork. Mainstream stores including Macy's, Nordstrom and Wal-Mart often carry a few green garments, but not necessarily prominently displayed.

You'll have better luck at specialty retailers such as REI, Patagonia and American Apparel. Independent boutiques are a good bet, as are locally based Web sites such as www.FashionEthic.com.

Q: I've heard the Pacific Northwest is a leader in this field. Is that right?

A: Yes. Greensource, a 16-year-old Renton-based apparel company that few people locally know about, is one of the world's top 10 buyers of organic cotton. Its organic-cotton shirts, denim jeans and other products are made overseas and sold at major retailers under various labels including ReGen, Faded Glory and Route 66.

Oregon-based Nike has been consistently innovative in sustainable shoes and clothing and was just named one of America's 10 greenest large corporations by Newsweek magazine.

Greensource, Nike, Nordstrom and REI will all have active roles in an international Sustainable Textiles Conference Oct. 21-22 in Seattle.

The Puget Sound region is also a hotbed for high-quality used clothing, sold at scores of thrift and consignment stores.

The latest wrinkle on this is reclaimed clothing consisting of new designs spliced together from old clothes. It's available at crafts markets and selected specialty stores. Used clothing is the greenest of all, of course, because you have practically no new environmental impacts.

Q: Will green clothing cost me more?

A: Buying used clothes always saves money, but you'll spend more time shopping for them since it takes longer to separate the wheat from the chaff.

New green clothes such as organic cotton shirts often cost in the range of 15 percent more than regular cotton garments, mostly due to the smaller quantities being produced, says Greensource president David Basson. His company's goal is to make the price the same.

Basson believes the future of clothing will be sewn from greener fabrics including organic and recycled cotton, specially processed bamboo, soy, Ingeo (made from corn) and recycled polyester.

"There's so much research going on in the industry, and it's so exciting," Basson says. "We're making huge strides."

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