



NEWS & RECORD

Town Square: Green revives textile firm

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By April Harris

GREENSBORO, NC — When the subject of the local textile industry comes up, it's hard not to wince. It seems we all know someone who has been affected by the industry's dramatic decline.

At its peak in 1996, textile companies were proud employers of more than 200,000 North Carolinians. Those of us who grew up in Greensboro held a familiar association with these local businesses that employed our parents, grandparents and friends. Names like Burlington Industries and Cone Mills felt like forever.

However, de-industrialization in the 1980s and 1990s, followed by dramatic changes in trade policy in the late 1990s, led to domestic shifts in the industry and an increase in offshore production.

North Carolina was hard-hit. By 2006, there had been a 40 percent decline in the number of plants, from 2,153 to 1,282, and a 65 percent decrease in employment to 80,232 workers. Many mills that had been in operation for more than 100 years closed.

And in the recent recession, this all feels a bit like a bruise that won't heal.

One local company, the synthetic fiber manufacturer Unifi, in many ways exemplifies the travails of the textile industry.

But it also shines a bright light on future possibilities.

Unafraid to change course, Unifi has been smart enough to embrace innovation as an investment in its own profitability. For the fiscal year that ended June 27, 2010, the company recorded its first annual profit in 10 years, and it now appears to be set on a path to continuing profitability.

Founded in 1971, Unifi manufactures polyester and nylon. When North American and Central American synthetic apparel production plummeted over the past two decades, Unifi undertook a significant downsizing, closed plants and laid off hundreds of employees. Recognizing a need both to refocus on core competencies and diversify into more specialty items, in 2007 Unifi put a new management team in place. That team knew there was a place for a domestic textile business; it was just going to look different than before.

During this time, Unifi began to speak directly to its "customers' customers" — downstream companies like The North Face and Nike — asking about current apparel trends and which products were being made here versus in Asia. This back-and-forth with customers led Unifi to discover an increasing demand for recycled products.

At the same time, Unifi identified a need for internal sustainability and began a series of changes to reduce and reuse its own manufacturing waste. For example, the company developed a way to take extruded synthetic yarn that fell to its plant floor and recycle it back into first-quality polyester.

The simultaneous recognition of a trend toward recycled fiber content in domestic apparel production,

coupled with the company's desire to increase its own sustainable practices, led to the development of exactly the right product at the right time: REPREVE.

A synthetic yarn made from 100 percent recycled materials, REPREVE offsets the need to produce virgin polyester and conserves petroleum-based resources.

But this is not your father's polyester (the hot, scratchy and heavy polyester leisure suits from the 1970s). Manufactured with any number of amazing attributes, the more modern synthetic can feel as comfortable as cotton, wick away moisture, provide UV protection and last longer than ever before.

Since it was commercialized in 2007, REPREVE has evolved into a family of products made from used plastic water bottles. (Yes, the plastic bottles labeled "1" that you set out in your recycling bins.) It took Unifi several years to develop a first-quality recycled yarn, but it has been well worth it.

-- Unifi knew it had something in 2009 when the Denali jacket, which is one of Northface's best-selling products, converted to REPREVE.

-- In 2010, Haggar chose REPREVE recycled fiber for its "Green" line of khakis and dress slacks. On average, each pair of the slacks prevents seven 16-ounce plastic bottles from entering a landfill. The pants also dry faster (saving energy) and hold a crease much longer.

-- Through the REPREVE Textile Takeback Program, "cut-and-sew scraps" from companies such as Polartec are recycled back into REPREVE and then used in many products, from clothes to office furnishings, rather than going to a landfill.

-- And Ford announced in January that it will recycle 2 million plastic bottles by incorporating seat fabric made from REPREVE into the 2012 Focus Electric and Fusion Hybrid.

Unifi expects to recycle more than 900 million bottles globally into REPREVE in 2012.

Sustainability initiatives have changed the way these textiles are made. It is encouraging to rediscover a local company that is leading the way.

For more information, visit www.news-record.com

More information about Repeve can be found at www.Repreve.com.