

Article 552

[Previous Article](#) [Next Article](#) [Return to Headlines](#)

BUSINESS

CLOTHES 'ECO' THE PAST**HILLARY CHURA ASSOCIATED PRESS**

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Page 12C

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That bottle of Mountain Dew that cooled you off in the summer may keep you warm six months later.

Wickers Sportswear Inc. is working to keep both the winter's cold and America's landfill use at bay by making thermal underwear and other products from recycled plastic.

Wickers ranks among a growing number of U.S. companies turning recycled plastic into underwear, T-shirts, backpacks and the like.

As for its thermals, navy blue and Mountain Dew green are the only colors available - green because the bottles are green and blue because that is the only environmentally safe dye the company has found, said quality control manager Carol Metivier.

In November, Lands' End, the Dodgeville, Wis., mail-order company, will begin selling 100 percent recycled underwear made by Wickers.

Tops and bottoms, for men and women, will sell for \$22 each, the same as comparable thermal underwear made of nonrecycled material.

The company makes its thermals at a factory here in Wolfeboro. Wickers, based in Commack, N.Y., employs about 75 people overall, most of them at the Wolfeboro plant.

Wickers has only started marketing recycled underwear but expects to sell about \$400,000 in thermals this year.

Overall sales at Wickers have nearly doubled since 1991 and sales this year are projected at \$20 million.

The fabric Wickers uses for its thermals comes from the fiber Fortrel EcoSpun, made by Wellman Inc., a plastic recycler and polyester producer. The garments are as warm as thermal underwear made from virgin material.

Wellman has been making its recycled product out of used soda bottles since 1979, but it wasn't until two years ago that it produced a fiber soft enough for clothing, said spokeswoman Judith Langan.

She said EcoSpun is as good as polyester that contains no recycled material.

"It has the added value of diverting all these bottles out of landfills. Every year they're closing

them because they're filling up," she said.

Wellman can keep 2.4 billion bottles per year out of U.S. dumps and another 250 million bottles out of foreign dumps.

She said most people prefer recycled products to comparable goods made from virgin material, and they're willing pay a bit extra. Wellman starts by melting plastic bottles and then converts them to fiber, which it sells to companies that knit or weave it into fabric.

Wellman is the only company to make fiber from 100 percent recycled goods and Wickers is the only company to make 100 percent recycled underwear, Langan said. Last year, two companies bought Wellman's recycled material - Wickers and Patagonia Inc. Today, Wellman sells to at least 70 companies.

"This is not a fad. It's a way of life," Langan said. "We think the future of this product looks wonderful." Patagonia, of Ventura, Calif., makes 34 products from recycled plastic bottles, including sweaters, jackets, hats, gloves and other outdoor clothing, said Mike Harrelson, a company spokesman.

"People see few tangible results after they cart bottles off to the curb," Harrelson said. "But they are heartened by seeing a viable second market for their recyclables."

PHOTO BY: ASSOCIATED PRESS Julie Syvinski stitches a T-shirt made from recycled Mountain Dew bottles at Wickers Sportwear Inc. in Wolfeboro, N.J. The company uses recycled plastic bottles to make clothing,