

# Warm, Fuzzy and Eco-Friendly

## Fox River knits together innovative products and practices. **By Lou Dzierzak**

In 1984, when issues of environmental sustainability and global climate change were far from the American consciousness, Becky Lessard started working on ways to save energy at Osage, IA-based sock manufacturer Fox River Mills.

"Wes Birdsall, the manager of the local utility, taught the community how to save energy rather than invest in new power generation equipment," Lessard recalls. "It became a way of life for us." Today, Lessard carries the formal title of chief environmental officer at Fox River, and leads the company's efforts to reduce its impact on the environment in all aspects of operations and product design.

Lessard explains the ethos of her personal and professional mission: "I read an article that mentioned that astronauts can see landfills at the bottom of our oceans from outer space. That really amazed me, so the things we can do to help prevent that in the future make me feel good about what Fox River is doing."

When an outdoor enthusiast takes one of the company's high-performance socks from an outdoor specialty retailer's display, it marks the last step in Fox River's commitment to protecting the

environment. The 107-year-old company has initiated programs that recycle almost 450,000 pounds of materials annually. As a result, the company's waste volume has been reduced by more than 50 percent. In addition, energy-efficient air exchange systems are used to keep the Fox River facility cool in the summer and warm in the winter. Moreover, a comprehensive energy audit conducted with Iowa State University reduced Fox River's energy costs by 30 percent.

On the manufacturing floor, Fox River has instituted an innovative organic shrink treat/wet finish process that does not use petrochemicals, volatile organic compounds or wastewater-treatable components. The materials used are 100 percent biodegradable. Water used in the manufacturing process is treated as a precious natural resource and is carefully monitored.

Under Lessard's leadership, Fox River is exploring alternative energy sources such as biomass and wind power. For example, a local start-up company is using some of Fox River's recycled materials to create biomass briquettes that can be used in place of coal. Fox River plans to heat one of the company's warehouses with a biomass fuel system next year.

Joel Anderson, Fox River branded division president, notes that the company's product line carries the environmental stewardship mission forward to the consumer. "The manufacturing and product sides have come together so we can speak authentically. We walk the walk on this end. We know we are doing things right. When we show our socks to our customers we are as eco-friendly as anyone in the world," he says.



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In '05, Fox River became the first major sock manufacturer to introduce organic Merino wool socks. The raw materials, from the Vermont Organic Fiber Company, reflects U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) standards for true "organic" products and has been independently verified by accredited certification programs.

One year later, in 2006, Fox River introduced a line of corn-based socks using Ingeo fibers from NatureWorks, a joint venture of Cargill and Teijin Limited of Japan. Ingeo is the first man-made fiber created without using fossil fuels. NatureWorks starts with sugar derived from corn, and then takes the sugar and ferments it (in a process similar to that used to make alcoholic beverages), which turns it into lactic acid. The lactic acid is transformed into a polymer called NatureWorks PLA.

Fox River markets its Ingeo fiber and organic Merino wool sock product lines under the Good Earth Collection banner.

"We've been doing things on the manufacturing and operations side for 20 to 30 years," explains Anderson. "Since the Ingenio [line] was met with such open arms at retail, it just made sense for us to continue the natural evolution of eco-friendly yarn development."

Each year, Fox River analyzes its product line to determine how more green and earth-friendly yarns can be incorporated into the mix. "We've entirely re-engineered the Ingenio program," notes Anderson. "In Spring 2008, the Ingenio will be combined with recycled polyester, which will give us better performance characteristics."

Although organic Merino and Ingeo fibers can influence the retail price of Fox River's socks, using the environmentally friendly materials doesn't affect design or construction. "It doesn't change the way we make the sock whatsoever. We're finding that the performance of eco yarns is more than holding its own," offers Anderson.

Educating retailers and consumers about the Fox River's environmental initiatives is an ongoing process.

"When people walk into our booth at OR and ask us to show our eco socks," says Lessard. "It's funny for me to hear that because they expect us to show them one sock, but every sock made at Fox River has a significant eco component to it."

Three decades after Lessard starting paying attention to environmental issues, she's pleased to see that the wider world is taking the green movement seriously. "The consumer is more concerned and aware and more willing to look for products that are eco-friendly," she observes. "I'm just amazed how much it's changed in the last 12 months. Everything you pick up talks about the green story. It's wonderful." ■



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