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Keeping clothing out of landfill

Retex Northwest collects clothes, shoes across Snohomish, King counties

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Aluminum, paper, plastic, glass — the recycling of such goods is commonplace nowadays, with residents and businesses separating them from the waste stream as a matter of practice. The same cannot be said for clothing, however.

While the Environmental Protection Agency estimates that about 34 percent of paper waste was recovered for recycling in 1999, only about 15 percent of textiles escaped the landfill. Monika Knotek would like to change that.

“Textiles are a resource for the globe, and they definitely don’t belong in landfills,” said Knotek, general manager of Retex Northwest Inc.

The company, based in south Snohomish County, is part of the textile recycling industry, an industry that annually removes 2.5 billion pounds of textiles from the waste stream, according to the Council for Textile Recycling.

For Retex Northwest, the process of keeping clothing and shoes from the landfill begins with its collection bins, which now number about 140 and are located in the parking lots of retail establishments across Snohomish and King counties.

Establishing that network wasn’t easy in the beginning, when Knotek first

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approached property owners in 1998.

“It took us about a year to a year-and-a-half to place the first bins ... because it was a new enterprise, a new view of recycling in the United States,” said Knotek, a native of Switzerland, where textile recycling is more common.

Once collected, the clothing is brought to Retex Northwest’s Lynnwood facility and loaded into 40-foot containers to be shipped to processing centers overseas, often to Europe but also to other parts of the world, Knotek said.

“It goes to grading factories; they purchase bulk from us,” she said.

The processing centers sort the clothing into two groups: second-hand clothing and secondary raw material.

The second-hand clothing is graded by size, gender and season before being sent to developing countries.

“There is a great need for clothing in Second and Third World countries,” Knotek said. “People who are even willing to pay for clothing in Africa pay minimal dollar amounts — 25 cents for a pair of jeans.”

The clothing graded as secondary raw material is reprocessed into rags for the cleaning industry and recycled into new fiber for use in housing insulation, furniture stuffing and even tar paper for the roofing industry, Knotek said.

Of all the clothing and shoes that get collected in Retex Northwest bins, about 95 percent gets reused or recycled, she added, with the other 5 percent getting incinerated as a means of energy creation, “so there really isn’t anything that goes back into the landfills.”

While Retex Northwest is working to grow its network of collection bins, the 7-year-old company is not looking to hurt the efforts of nonprofit organizations that collect and sell used clothing to help fund their social service activities, Knotek said.

With more than 80 percent of clothing still entering landfills, there is room for both nonprofit and for-profit enterprises to put used clothes to use, she said. “We would like to provide another opportunity for people to give away their unwanted clothes.”

The company is looking to partner with groups that would like to raise funds for their activities by collecting clothing, Knotek added.

“With so much going into the landfills, there is ... a lot to do,” she said.

For more information on Retex Northwest, go online to www.retexnorthwest.com.

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