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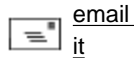
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Worn here, then there

By *Eric Fetters*
 Herald Writer

MILL CREEK - Shirts, shoes and slacks worn around Snohomish County may show up halfway around the world one day, thanks to a local firm specializing in textile recycling.

Retex Northwest Inc. is trying to increase the popularity of clothes recycling, a practice that's much more routine outside the U.S.

Headquarters: Mill Creek
 Employees: Six
 Founded: 1998 Web
 site: www.retexnorthwest.com

With the company's help, used clothes that otherwise might be headed for the trash can find a second life in Africa and other developing parts of the world.

"There is a great, great demand for secondhand clothes around the world," said Monika Knotek, general manager at Retex's Mill Creek headquarters.

Behind the office, a shipping container filled with bags of clothing awaits a trip to Germany. There, the items will be sorted, with many going to other countries for resale at affordable prices.

Unwearable garments can be reprocessed into industrial rags for cleaning and other uses or reprocessed into new fiber for uses such as stuffing for automobile seats.

Overall, 95 percent of the clothes collected by Retex end up being recycled in one way or another, Knotek said.

Inspiration doesn't usually strike at a trash dump, but that's exactly where Knotek got the idea that became Retex several years ago.

"I was home staying with my baby, and we were doing remodeling in our house and had to haul things to the dump," she said. While her family dropped off their debris, a woman next to her was throwing out 10 bags of clothes.

Knotek grew up in Switzerland, where residents recycle about half of their used clothes and shoes. Here, even with charity thrift stores and others accepting donated clothes, only about 15 percent of used clothing and textiles gets recycled in the U.S., according to the Environmental Protection Agency.

After seeing those bags of clothes trashed at the dump, Knotek called her family, which has been involved in the textile recycling business in Europe for years. They now own the local business as

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well.

Since for-profit clothes recycling businesses aren't common, it took nearly a year for Retex to make arrangements to place its first collection bins around Snohomish and King counties, Knotek said. There are now about 150 such collection containers in the two counties.

Retex's two trucks collect donated clothes from the bins at least once a week and bring them to the Mill Creek facility. From there, they are packed into shipping containers for their trip overseas.

Retex makes money by selling the pounds of used clothing to the big recycling processors, usually in Europe.

"The magic's in the processing," said Bernie Brill, executive director of the Secondary Materials and Recycled Textiles Association. "If you boxed up your clothing and send it to Africa, you wouldn't get anything for it."

But the processors keep close tabs on what kinds and sizes of clothing are in demand in Africa and other areas, he said. For example, men's clothing tends to be more valuable than women's. That's because men's styles change slower and men tend to wear the same clothes longer.

While a few people have professed confusion over Retex's collection points with bins for nonprofit charities that collect clothes, Retex isn't trying to hurt charitable clothes donation programs, Knotek said.

Even with the Salvation Army, Goodwill and Volunteers of America, which sell donated clothes in local thrift shops, there's obviously still a need for recycling options, she said.

Betsy McFeely, public relations director at Seattle Goodwill, said that nonprofit organization just wants to make sure donors are educated when they give away clothes to either a charitable or a for-profit recycling business. For example, clothes donated to Goodwill are sold in its thrift stores to help assist low-income and other local residents with job training and education programs.

At Retex, Knotek said she'd like to increase the firm's collection bins around the region. While it would help her business, she likes the idea that it would help the environment as well. "It's very important to recycle textiles. They're a very valuable resource and they don't belong in landfills."

Reporter Eric Fetters: 425-339-3453 or fetters@heraldnet.com.

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