



CALIFORNIA FASHION ASSOCIATION

444 South Flower Street, 37th Floor · Los Angeles, CA 90071 · ph. 213.688.6288 · fax 213.688.6290

Email: info@calfashion.org Website: www.californiafashionassociation.org

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California Manufacturers Look for Ways to Beat Drought

By Andrew Asch | Thursday, May 7, 2015

California's State Water Resources Control Board took emergency measures to act on California's harsh drought last month, ranging from restaurants not serving water unless requested to prohibitions against using potable water to wash down driveways and sidewalks.

But the state's restrictions have yet to affect California's apparel makers, even though dye houses and commercial laundries rely on heavy water usage to make apparel items such as jeans to T-shirts and special-occasion dresses.

So far, state agencies have not made specific directions to the state's fashion producers to change their production methods. Nor has the drought been a major topic of conversation among factory managers, according to interviews with fashion executives. Still, several California fashion businesses are already experimenting with ways to cut back the amount of water used.

Pacific Blue Dye House, headquartered in Los Angeles, has experimented for years with environmentally sustainable ways to power its factory and make clothes. In December 2009, the company unveiled a solar-energy program that supplies more than 80 percent of the energy needs of its 30,000-square-foot facility.

Recently, Dotan Shoham, the co-owner of Pacific Blue Dye House and its in-house contemporary knit brand, Gypsy 05, has been seeking ways to curb the facility's water use. He claims to have cut down on his water use by more than 25 percent this year.

Water-saving steps include cutting shifts in the factory. Pacific Blue used to run a night shift but now is only open 10 hours each day. Washing cycles have been cut down. Garments are hang-dried rather than machine-dried to cut back on wash cycles. The staff has become vigilant about fixing leaks in pipes in the facility. Shoham has directed his staff to sweep factory floors rather than wash them down.

"I wish one day we will find a waterless dye process," Shoham said. "We need to cut everywhere from all angles. ... The sooner we wake up, the better. We are heading into tough times."

Other manufacturers have been experimenting with other ways to save water.

Kevin Kelly, chief executive officer and co-owner of the US Blanks basics manufacturer in downtown Los Angeles, said his company works with businesses that make it a policy to conserve water. "We try to use dye houses and facilities that have recycled-water capabilities or are moving strongly in that direction," he said. The company also uses recycled yarns that do not use as much water to produce garments. A US Blanks priority will be using raw materials that do not require as much water to produce.

Volcom, the high-profile fashion and action-sportswear brand, remodeled its Costa Mesa, Calif., headquarters in



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2013. With the remodel, it installed low-flow toilets and sensor faucets that only draw water when a hand is placed under the faucet, said Derek Sabori, the brand's vice president of sustainability. The company is also working to reduce water usage in its supply chain, all of which is located overseas.

Eco Prk, a Paramount, Calif.-based laundry, offers a chemical-free process that uses oxygen to wash indigo or dye, said Kevin Youn, chief executive officer of the company. He estimated that traditional laundries use 25 to 45 gallons of water to make a garment. He said his laundry can cut water use by 95 percent.

While news of the drought dominates current headlines, people in California's fashion industry have been conscious of the state's water issues for decades and have been active in discussion with local governments on conserving water, said **Ilse Metchek**, president of the **California Fashion Association**, a trade association for California's garment industry.

"This is not a new issue," **Metchek** said. "In the past we have investigated the options."

Options for factories have included using reclaimed water. In the late 1990s, Metchek said, she and colleagues had expressed interest in factories using more with reclaimed water, or water that has been cleaned up and recycled after previous use, but there was not enough political will to make it a reality then.

Factories could be using reclaimed water more in the future, said Newsha K. Ajami, who is the director of urban water policy at Stanford University's Water in the West program.

"Water that comes in direct contact with human beings has to be of the highest quality," she said. "Solutions will be different from one region to another and from one sector to the next." She forecasts that municipalities and water districts, where most of the policy action will take place on the local level, will start having conversations with their business customers and industrial stakeholders on different options for conserving water.

New directions have been taken by the West Basin Municipal Water District, which serves Southwest Los Angeles County. It is a water district that has been supplying recycled water to businesses and institutions such as Los Angeles International Airport, she said.

"This is a challenge and an opportunity," Ajami said of the drought and its effect on California. "We should rethink the way we manage our water resources and move toward more sustainable solutions."

The Los Angeles Department of Water and Power has noted that it will help businesses review their facilities to confirm if they can use recycled water, said Kim Hughes, a spokesperson for the LA DWP. Recycled water is delivered through separate piping systems.