

Feathered Friends

Responsibility standards make down even more comforting

By Glenna B. Musante

Few insulating materials work as well at keeping things warm as down. Whether used in ski jackets or a comforter, down is a staple part of both the fashion and home textile industries. But despite its widespread use and appeal, apparently little thought was given over the years to the animal welfare issues related to the breeding, down collection or slaughtering practices involved with producing down. That has now changed.

Highly publicized investigations conducted by animal welfare advocates between 2009 and 2012 revealed questionable harvesting practices throughout the down and feather supply chain. This includes collecting down from geese aggressively forced fed to make foie gras; live plucking of geese; and raising animals in stressful, crowded, unnatural conditions. In response, brands such as Patagonia and The North Face – two brands initially targeted by animal welfare groups – decided to develop new industry standards to support transparency in the supply chain.

It's been no easy task. The process of developing standards has involved hundreds of hours of work, a rigorous inventory of existing practices, countless dollars invested in research, staff, and pilot studies, and collaboration on the part of multiple brands to develop guidelines that not only prevent animal cruelty, but will also be adopted and can be monitored.

In the end, 2013 and 2014 were benchmark years for down standards. Patagonia published its 100% Traceable Down Standard in 2013, and beginning Fall 2014, all Patagonia down products will contain 100% Traceable Down. Also in 2014, a consortium of textile industry organizations led by The North Face ushered in the Responsible Down Standard (RDS), and Swedish outdoor apparel maker Fjällräven developed standards of its own. In addition, Germany's Downpass Association introduced a down standard.

All of the new down and feather standards are similar but not exactly the same. Here, **Inside Outdoor** looks at the new standards, some of which are still in development.

Patagonia's TDS and the Global TD

In 2002, Patagonia introduced down into its product line without scrutinizing the farming or production methods of its suppliers. The company later became the subject of a highly publicized investigation by Four Paws, an animal rights group, for using "cruel down" plucked from force fed animals. In response, Patagonia decided to take a deep look at its practices and supply chain and resolved to develop a standard for animal welfare that could be modeled by the entire outdoor apparel industry.

The Traceable Down Standard, as it is called, has since been shared with NSF, a global certification body, under the name "The Global Traceable Down Standard." NSF has been charged with helping companies worldwide join Patagonia in its efforts to reduce animal cruelty in the sourcing of down.

With the Traceable Down Standard, all Patagonia down products will contain 100% Traceable Down beginning fall 2014. Under that standard, live plucking and force feeding are prohibited throughout the supply chain, which for Patagonia begins at the parent farm where birds can remain for four years laying eggs. Independent auditors visit parent farms to ensure best practices. Independent auditors also visit hatcheries to ensure baby birds are treated and transported humanely and also visit the raising farms, where birds in the supply chain are at the highest risk of being force fed. In the slaughterhouse, down is washed and segregated to prevent accidental blending with non-certified down. Patagonia's 100% Traceable Down remains segregated at the down processor, in transit and at the garment factory. Meanwhile, garment sewers receive special training for handling 100% Traceable Down.

Patagonia has taken this initiative a step further by launching a consumer-facing public education campaign (www.patagonia.com/traceabledown) in stores, in its catalog, in print and online advertising, on YouTube (with their 'What the Pluck' video), on social media, and in a broad public relations push.

The Responsible Down Standard

The RDS was designed for global use by the entire feather and down supply chain. To date, this standard has been picked up by more than 30 brands, which now use it to certify their down. This includes The North Face, Eddie Bauer, H&M, Adidas and Helly Hansen. In addition, more than 300 sites have

been certified to date in Eastern Europe, China, and Taiwan. The RDS International Working Group, which collaborated on the development of the standard, includes The Outdoor Industry Association, Four Paws, Allied Feather and Down, Down Lite, Textile Exchange and several apparel brands.

RDS has been active for certification since February 2014, and in development since 2012. The development of this standard has included desk and field studies, pilot audits, research, training and certification at farms and slaughter houses, and work with auditors.

Anne Gillespie of Textile Exchange, the organization that owns and will oversee administration of the RDS, estimates that RDS is now supporting well more than 25 million birds. She says that number is expected to grow as brands adopting the standard move over time from partial to full compliance, and as additional brands embrace RDS.

The purpose of this standard is to protect animals in the feather and down supply chain from experiencing unnecessary harm or trauma, plus provide brands with the tools to make accurate product claims. Under RDS, force feeding of birds and live plucking in any form are prohibited. In addition, the RDS promotes a holistic animal welfare policy that protects birds from hunger and thirst, discomfort, pain, injury and disease, and supports animals living in environments where they can express normal behavior, such as swimming and roaming cage-free. The RDS also specifies that the chain of custody for RDS-certified down remain unbroken from hatchling to final garment production.

The standard covers the global supply chain from hatchling to final garment assembly and sets stringent traceability standards. Products must contain 100 percent RDS certified down to bear the RDS logo, and blended labeling cannot be used on any consumer-facing products. Certified products can include blended down that contains a percentage of certified down to help participating companies meet overall responsible down consumption goals.

The standard also calls for regular audits and shadow audits by Control Union or other approved certification bodies. The audit process applies to each step along the supply chain from hatcheries to sewing factories to warehouses.

Although the RDS standards have been available for a year, products based on this standard are not expected to enter the market until 2015, with some companies gradually phasing in RDS-approved down over time.

Four Paws has fallen short of endorsing RDS, but has been supportive of the process.

The RDS was originally initiated by The North Face, and the first version of this standard was developed for them, with stakeholder input. The current version is based on a collaborative process that involved several apparel industry organizations and brands. Says Gillespie, "The response to this and the level of engagement by brands working on the standard has been amazing."

The Fjällräven Down Promise

In 2009, as other players in the down and feather universe were criticized by animal rights groups for selling product made from down collected from live plucked and force-fed birds, Swedish outdoor products maker Fjällräven decided to take a close look at its own practices and suppliers and then developed its own standard.

Fjällräven down is a by-product of the food industry and is sourced from geese raised primarily for food. The Fjällräven Down Promise guarantees that all Fjällräven products are made from ethically produced down. This includes having full traceability from hatchling to finished product and ensuring that geese have the best living standards possible. To that end Fjällräven works with just one down supplier, which is based in the Yangshou province of China. The company further promises that this down will never be mixed with down from other sources.

The quality control system for this standard includes regular inspections by third-party organizations, including an independent Swedish veterinarian who checks living conditions, and visits from the International Down and Feather Laboratory (IDFL), an independent testing institute that verifies the quality of cleanliness of the down during the processing stage.

All down products will be marked with the Fjällräven Down Promise logo.

"Fjällräven places high demands on all of their products, but we are very careful to ensure that our down is produced in the most ethical manner," says Aiko Bode, chief sustainability officer for Fjällräven. "From the bird farms via the slaughterhouse and down processors, to the factories that make our final products, we always strive to meet the best practices."

DOWNPASS

Developed by the DOWNPASS Association, and headquartered in Germany, DOWNPASS is a down certification program for the outdoor apparel, sleeping

bag and home furnishing markets. DOWNPASS is based on the standards specified in the European Convention for the Protection of Animals Kept for Farming Purposes as it relates to animal husbandry. According to the organization's Web site, vets and animal welfare organizations have played "a significant role" in the development of DOWNPASS standards.

The standard's primary goal is to develop and implement a globally recognized system that supports production of down and feathers from ethical sources. With DOWNPASS, all finished products and down and feather transport containers must be traceable through the supply chain back to the breeding farms. The standard calls for inspections, traceability and audits carried out by recognized, neutral third parties. Also, products bearing the DOWNPASS label must not contain feathers plucked from live animals. Traceability is provided at least to the slaughterhouse. DOWNPASS also excludes the use of feathers and down from force fed birds.

Each standard involves steps designed to reduce or prevent animal cruelty in the collection of feathers and down. The next logical step is adoption. "Now that we've achieved the tough standard of 100 percent traceable down and [have] started raising awareness among consumers about the realities of conventionally sourced down, we want to encourage all other companies to settle for nothing less in their supply chains," says Adam Fetcher, a spokesperson for Patagonia.

Gillespie adds that Textile Exchange also is working aggressively to educate the public about humanely raised traceable down. Adoption of any new standard can take time, especially one that impacts so many aspects of a supply chain. But once people know about the issue, says Gillespie, taking action seems to be a natural next step. "In the end" she adds, "it all comes down to the number of birds being protected."

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