

Representing The Wiping Materials, Recycled Clothing, New Textile By Products and Fiber Industries

In My Opinion



SMART Meets with U.S. Commerce Department

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I want to say by introduction that SMART's government relations committee recognizes that the biggest threat facing our industry today is lack of available supply, which means our foremost goal is to convince government officials to recognize our industry activities as legitimate "recycling" to address these shortages.

However, fighting against bans and restrictions is also an important goal for the long term. As many of you are aware, SMART adopted the following policy on bans in 2007.

"SMART supports countries that accept exports of second hand clothing and actively seeks opportunities in which the U.S. government – as well as any government outside the U.S. in which our members operate – can place pressure on foreign countries to remove restrictions on imports of second hand textiles."

SMART Government Relations Consultant Jessica Franken and I met in Washington, DC on June 2 to explain to senior officials from the Commerce Department's Office of Textiles and Apparel (OTEXA) the important role our industry plays in achieving overall U.S. international trade objectives, our interest in seeing an end to bans and other unfair trade restrictions, and even segued into discussions about our supply issues as well.

The meeting was arranged after I stopped OTEXA Supervisory International Trade Specialist Maria D'Andrea during a recent Industry Trade Advisory Committee for Textiles and Apparel (ITAC-13) meeting to ask her why bans and other trade restrictions affecting secondhand clothing are typically not addressed in U.S. free trade agreements. Ms. D'Andrea suggested she would put me in touch with officials who were familiar with the background on this issue.

As it turns out, Ms. D'Andrea is a woman of her word, and just a couple of weeks later, Jessica and I were sitting down with her

and two other senior OTEXA officials that have extensive experience in trade negotiations, Richard Stetson and Linda Martinich.

We were delighted to learn that the Commerce Department is already quite familiar with the many positive attributes of our win-win-win-win industry and were even more happy to share our outstanding new public relations packet and the details of how our industry works from collections to final product.

Mr. Stetson and Ms. Martinich stressed that secondhand clothing is always discussed at the trade negotiations. However, while it is one thing to be able to halt the imposition of a new trade barrier to used clothing if U.S. officials get word ahead of time, it is extremely difficult to pressure countries that already have laws on the books restricting used clothing, especially if they claim they are doing so to prevent the spread of disease, which, if a legitimate concern, would not be considered a violation of global trade law.

We explained that the "health hazard" issue is just an excuse that entrenched interests employ to restrict the importation of used clothing. The OTEXA officials had a number of constructive ideas about information we could provide that might help bolster the United States' case the next time a trading partner digs in its heels on secondhand clothing restrictions. They suggested we provide studies showing that our products do not pose a health risk, as well as information about available sterilization/fumigation services. They also suggested we summarize whatever information we have detailing the net positive impact used clothing imports have on those economies that allow it. We said that assembling information on the positive impacts our industry makes on the developing world should be no problem. After all, international non-governmental organization OXFAM devoted an entire report to the subject, and noted economist and trade expert Pietra Rivoli spent several chapters on the topic in her seminal book on globalization, the Travels of a T-Shirt in the Global Economy.

Both Jessica and I left very pleased that our Department of Commerce knows who we are, and supports our cause. It was determined that we should arm our negotiators with well researched information so that we can achieve our goal of reversing restrictions on used clothing wherever they exist.