

## Fox River Mills Wows with Service & Quality

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When Steve Newman became the first person to walk around the world in 1983, he did it wearing Fox River Mills socks. Since its beginning in the Fox River Valley of Appleton, Wisconsin in 1900, Fox River Mills Inc. has produced quality knitted socks and handwear. Today, from the company's home in Osage, Iowa, Fox River Mills is one of the leading outdoor sock manufacturers in the world.

Fox River Mills is a second-generation, family-owned company, the oldest sock mill in North America. Owners and brothers John and Jeff Lessard are president and vice president of sales, respectively. The greater Fox River Mills family extends to 300 full-time employees in the 300,000-square-foot business headquarters and knitting mill in Osage.

"Fox River Mills is a well-kept secret, I guess, because we know where we stand in the global market; we make the best socks in the world," says Joel Anderson, executive vice president of sales and marketing for Fox River Mills. "We ask independent retailers to give us a chance—we'll wow them with customer service, and our quality is unsurpassed."

### Manufacturing Quality

Fox River uses a combination of natural and synthetic fibers that minimize friction, creating an environment that promotes healthier feet. The company's patented Wick Dry® Health System™ is designed to help keep feet

dry and comfortable, no matter what the temperature. This system combines an inner layer of moisture-repelling yarn with an outer layer of moisture-attracting yarn to wick moisture away from feet.

"We have 107 years of heritage building, so we are very familiar with technical yarn," Anderson explains. "We bring in moisture-wicking yarns with better toe seams and better heel pockets. They fit better and stay up all day long."

### Environmental Pride

Fox River prides itself on its very proactive stance on energy conservation in all areas of the sock-making process. The company's knitting mill is an international model for green companies and it is part of an environmental initiative in Osage. With the Osage Municipal Utilities Demand-side Management Program, which began in



1974, Fox River has reduced energy costs more than 30 percent.

"Everyone is trying to be green and green-washing their products, while Fox River has an authentic eco story," Anderson points out. "There is an environmental aspect to every sock made at Fox River, whether it is recycled air, water or the environmentally-friendly manufacturing process."

Although consumers have only very recently begun to demand products made from environmentally-friendly yarns, 34 percent of Fox River Mills' product line is made with an eco yarn component, whether corn or recycled polyester. The yarn for the corn-based socks is Ingeo™ fiber, the world's first manufactured fiber made from 100 percent annually renewable plant resources, not oil.

"Five or six years ago, we simply didn't have the demand for corn-based and recycled polyester yarns, but now you open our catalog and that's a significant portion of our product line," Anderson says.

Other Fox River Mills environmental initiatives include:



**Fox River Mills takes pride in being environmentally friendly.**



A combination of natural and synthetic fibers in Fox River Mills socks promotes foot health.



Joel Anderson, executive vice president of sales and marketing for Fox River Mills.

> **Fox River recycles nearly 450,000 pounds of material each year.** Packaging, boxes, magazines, plastic film and yarn cones are recycled, and yarn scraps are ground up for carpet backing, dog beds and car seat stuffing. Machine oils, batteries, fluorescent tubes, old iron and steel machinery and electronic parts are also recycled. All mill and office papers are recycled.

> **An energy-efficient air exchange system keeps the mill climate controlled.** The vacuum system at Fox River removes nearly 60,000 cubic feet of air per minute from the knit/seam floors. Instead of completely replacing the air, the system pulls the vacuumed air through filters and chillers and it is then returned to the mill. This requires much less energy than bringing the outside air back in and conditioning it from the first stages.

> **Water-reclamation and heat recovery systems heat the mill in winter** by re-circulating excess heat. In the summer, two wells on site pump water to chillers on the knitting floor to air-condition the mill. The hot air that is generated from the reclamation process heats the water used in the scouring and dyeing processes.

> **Fox River developed and uses an organic shrink treatment process.** Organic shrink treating means that the company does not use petrochemicals, ozone-depleting compounds, global warming compounds, hazardous air pollutants or wastewater treatable components of any kind. The ingredients used are naturally derived and are 100 percent biodegradable.

### Areas for Growth

Women's and athletic product lines were both successfully introduced within the past decade. However, Fox River Mills' top two categories are outdoor and boot and field products. The company is now trying to extend the success it has had in the technical

market to the casual market. Casual and day-to-day socks make up less than 15 percent of the company's business, but Fox River plans to grow this segment, beginning with a new collection of men's and women's socks introduced during summer and fall 2008 shoe shows.

"We still have our strong core base in third- and fourth-quarter business, but if people are not out hiking or hunting, they work for a living Monday through Friday," Anderson explains. "Independent shoe retailers drive trends and fashion in the U.S., and if we can get a good strong hold with them, this will drive our brand for many years to come."

Fox River Mills' three primary competitors are Smart Wool, Wigwam and Thorlo. The company relies largely on word of mouth to market its product but does have a promotional budget available to its 50 sales representatives in North America, where the company does 95 percent of its business. These reps work with store owners and sales people to convince them that Fox River is the best product available to their customers. As an incentive, Fox River Mills will customize point of purchase displays for retailers.

The "Made in the USA" label has become increasingly important to sock consumers. "Consumers will see the American flag on the front of our package," Anderson says. "At the end of the day, that may not have mattered a decade ago—but now, it is starting to matter."

Whether customers are venturing to the top of Mount Everest or the far reaches of their own back yard, Anderson is confident they will be comfortable in Fox River Mills' products. ■

*Fox River Mill accepts orders via phone, fax or e-mail. As this article was written, the company anticipated launching a business-to-business website for order taking, processing and tracking during the last quarter of 2008. For more information, visit [FoxSox.com](http://FoxSox.com).*