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Is it "All Wool?"

Margaret Anne Clark

Iowa State College

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Margaret Anne Clark presents the highlights of a report on the new Wool Products Labeling Act

As the textile industry grows more complex, it has become increasingly difficult for the consumer to identify the fabrics she shops for unless they bear informative labels. Each year brings new manufactured fibers or modifications of old ones. These new fibers often closely resemble natural fibers: for instance, spun rayon looks somewhat like wool and other rayons resemble silk.

The Wool Products Labeling Act which went into effect last July 15 culminates a 40-year attempt on the part of intelligent consumers for legislation requiring informative labels on textile products.

To determine whether the consumers in Iowa are aware of the provisions of the Act, whether they make use of the information available on the label of wool products and whether the labels conform to the Rulings of the Federal Trade Commission was the subject of a master's thesis prepared at Iowa State this year by Ione Clothier McNay, graduate student in textiles and clothing and technical journalism. Mrs. McNay's work was supervised by Miss Iva Brandt, professor of textiles and clothing. In summarizing her study, Mrs. McNay writes that neither the 150 women shoppers observed nor the 142 who answered the questionnaires made full use of the material available to them. Part of this failure she attributes to the probable reason that, because of the newness of informative labeling, women have not yet had time to develop interest in it.

Provisions of the law require that all textile products containing 5 percent or more of wool must carry a label stating the exact percent according to the weight of each fiber present. Although the law requires no statement of the quality of the wool present, designation must be made as to whether the fiber is "wool," "reprocessed wool" or "reused wool."

Mrs. McNay's questionnaire study indicated more interest in the Wool Products Labeling Act than was evident in the shopping observation. Ninety of the 142 women questioned knew at least that some such labeling law existed, and only 33 of the 150 women shoppers showed any interest in the fiber labels. However, women who stated they were familiar with the Act actually were unable to give the simplest definition of the terms "wool," "reprocessed wool" and "reused wool."

"Wool," as listed on the new labels simply means new wool. This will include fleece from sheep and goats and such specialty hairs as those from the camel, alpaca, llama or vicuna. A popular term for this type of wool has long been "virgin wool."

"Reprocessed wool" is also new wool in the sense that it has never been used or worn by the consumer. However, wool in this class includes fibers reclaimed from clippings from the cutting tables and mill room sweepings. These fibers are reworked into yarns and spun into cloth which will be usable by the consumer.

"Reused wool" results when fibers from used garments, household textiles and the like are respun and woven into cloth. In both of these latter processes, the wool is thoroughly cleansed during the reclamation. Reclaiming wool is not a new process. Reworked wool has always been used in large quantity, although there were not labels to say so. Some of the finest tweeds, carpets and suitings are made of reclaimed fibers, and much reworked wool is superior in quality to the lower grades of virgin wool.

Misbranding of wool products is declared unlawful by the Wool Products Labeling Act. Labels must also tell the percentage of the total weight of the product of any non-fibrous loading, filling or adulterating matter. Labels require the name of the manufacturer of the product and the name of one or more of its distributors. The act does not decree the labeling of linings, paddings, stiffenings and trimmings which contain wool, even though they are a part of the garment.

As the war continues, there will be greater use of fiber mixtures, reprocessed and reused wool; otherwise, supplies will not stretch far enough to meet civilian needs. Both new and reworked wool possess qualities for holding warmth and protecting against cold.

New wool in general has a higher degree of resiliency which adds to its wearing qualities and is of value in holding a press or resisting wrinkles. There are, however, many grades of new wool varying in quality from the excellent to the very poor. When a fiber is torn open or broken, as in reworked wool, it loses resiliency and tensile strength. In spite of the possibility of added damage in remanufacturing the material, reused and reprocessed wool makes satisfactory garments for many uses and is less expensive than new wool.