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Sustainability: Conserving Creatively

Operators discuss maximizing productivity while saving resources: 'Economy and sustainability go hand in hand'

By Jack Morgan

Technology is facilitating significant progress for laundry operators on the environmental front—even as climate-change policies are getting less attention from the current U.S. administration and in some jurisdictions beyond.

But rather than backing off from “going green” amid reduced regulatory pressure, several operators we spoke with are taking a proactive approach to conservation. They believe that saving water, fuel and cutting CO₂ emissions wherever possible are not only the right thing to do...they're a better way to run your business in the mid-2020s.

As for the policy front, Chris Welch, president of Prudential Overall Supply, an industrial/mixed/clean room operator, based in Irvine, CA,

notes, “This has proven to be largely administration dependent/driven, but good firms will always have sustainability as part of their story, if for nothing else, economic reasons.” Welch adds, “Water availability for the laundry industry is a much more critical issue than climate change—even if it is not as ‘sexy’ or in demand by the compliance departments of most businesses. Reducing the rates of incoming water use and outgoing discharge means more to the laundry than to almost any other industry.”

Bryan Bartsch, president and CEO of Ecotex Healthcare Linen Service, and his father, Randy, executive chairman of Ecotex and the chair of **TRSA**, offered a combined U.S./Canadian perspective. In essence, they’re convinced that the shift to sustainability is here to stay. “We strongly believe sustainability in our industry is moving from a ‘program’ to a core operating requirement,” say the Bartschs, whose Vancouver-based healthcare laundry company includes plants in both Canada and the U.S. “That shift is being driven less by ideology and more by economics, regulation and customer expectations converging,” they say.

Bryan adds that while the pace of sustainability efforts varies on either side of the U.S. border, he doesn’t expect a reversal of the trend toward environmental upgrades. “From a policy perspective, we expect a continued push—particularly in Canada and parts of the U.S.—toward decarbonization, water stewardship and chemical regulation,” he says. “The pace may vary depending on political cycles, but the direction is clear. We are seeing increasing disclosure requirements, carbon-reporting frameworks and heightened scrutiny around water and effluent.”

This sense of inevitability is even more pronounced in Europe, says Carl-Johan Björkman, who operates a group of mat-processing

plants based in Arlöv, Sweden. “Sustainability and the need to reduce environmental impact are not a trend, but a real and long-term necessity, even if political priorities may shift over time,” says Björkman, who is the CEO and managing director of the company. “At Hr Björkmans, we take a long-term perspective and have embedded sustainability as an integral part of our business model.” For some operators, their image with

customers is a factor behind the laundry’s focus on sustainability.

Do Customers Care?

We posed the question above to several operators and received a range of responses. Among them was Linda McCurdy, the president and CEO of K-Bro Linen Inc., Edmonton, Alberta, Canada. K-Bro operates healthcare and hospitality laundries across Canada and the



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Environmental Issues

United Kingdom (UK). Most K-Bro customers view sustainability as a high priority. But they're also concerned about controlling costs. "Customers have been supportive of enhanced sustainability efforts," says McCurdy. "However, the importance of sustainability, relative to other criteria, including price, quality and reliability, varies by customer." Like the operators quoted above, sustainability is critical to K-Bro's mission. "Embracing sustainable practices is part of who we are," she says. "We're proud of our seven-decade history of putting people first, supporting our partners and environmental stewardship. Our talented, diverse and motivated workforce shares our values and represents our local communities."

Thomas Tsolakoglou, customer service manager for Shasta Linen Supply, Sacramento, CA, acknowledged that not all customers share his company's enthusiasm for environmental conservation. Nonetheless, it's a smart way to advance business goals. "It depends on the customer," Tsolakoglou says of attitudes toward sustainability among his company's mainly food and beverage (F&B) client base. "A customer that is looking to secure the lowest price possible isn't going to be supporting these efforts if they

increase the cost. For the most part, however, customers seem to appreciate any sort of sustainability effort that we promote, and it is always a good talking point during a sale process." Either way, Tsolakoglou, the son of former TRSA Chair Noël Richardson, recommends forging ahead toward a greener future, if for no other reason than to ensure compliance. "I believe that we should proceed with sustainability efforts regardless, as sustainable practices are not only beneficial for everyone, but will also inevitably become mandatory."

Welch says companies with strong environmental credentials can't expect customers to pay a premium for these practices. However, having a strong sustainability record can enhance a company's image. "Customers may require or strongly encourage these efforts," he says. "But there is no pricing favorability given to firms that demonstrate strong execution in this area. Firms should be active in developing sustainable practices when there is both an economic and a brand incentive to do so."

Björkman adds that demonstrating leadership in sustainability also helps lower costs, while enhancing a company's reputation—a win-win

by any measure. "Economy and sustainability go hand in hand," he says. "Reducing environmental impact also lowers costs by reducing energy consumption and chemical use, while creating greater value for our customers and their customers."

Trends in Recycling

Repurposing ragged-out textiles is an area that's always held great potential. However, more progress is needed, according to the operators we contacted. Björkman notes that he's using recycled materials in floor mats, which are themselves highly sustainable. "We use recycled yarn in all the mats we purchase," he says. "Mat rental in itself is a form of textile reuse and circularity."

From the supplier side, Frank Kerley, vice president, North America Healthcare and Hospitality at Standard Textile, says he's optimistic on innovations in this area. "Yes, we see momentum growing in textile recycling, including increasing interest in recycled synthetic fibers and other reclaimed materials, such as recycled polyester made from ocean-recovered plastics," Kerley says. "We are also seeing greater focus on closed-loop and circularity programs, along with designing products with recyclability in mind

Below: (l/r) Ecotex Healthcare Linen Service staff with President and CEO Bryan Bartsch; an overview of a K-Bro Linen Inc. plant, courtesy of the JENSEN Group.



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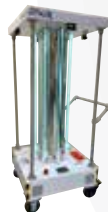
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“ PPE supplier-selection decisions are impacted by various factors, including sustainability, pricing, quality and reliability...In our experience, reusable isolation-gown usage has trended higher since the pandemic. ”

from the start. For our company, that progress is taking shape through textile recycling and ‘take-back programs’ that help reclaim and re-purpose materials, extend product lifecycles and reduce landfill waste.”

Bryan Barsch of Ecotex is somewhat skeptical about current recycling opportunities. But he sees potential for suppliers and operators to make headway in this area. “The idea of textile recycling is interesting and an area of increasing focus, especially in Europe, but it’s still in the earliest stages in terms of truly scalable, economically viable solutions,” he says. His father Randy adds that, “We have seen some progress in a couple of areas. First, basic recycling—repurposing end-of-life textiles into secondary uses such as wiping products, insulation material or other industrial applications—which continue to evolve and expand. Second, there is growing interest in fiber-to-fiber recycling technologies, particularly for cotton and polyester blends. The challenge remains: cost, logistics and the ability to process mixed materials at scale.”

Welch adds that while opportunities are available, high costs and logistical issues pose obstacles to expanding recycling. “The technology is there, but the price point is marginal and compounded by collection and distribution issues,” he says. “As costing issues decline over time, this may become more practical from an economic standpoint.”

Bartsch further points out that other steps beyond recycling can achieve

the same goal of extending the life of textile goods. “In the near term, the biggest gains are likely to come from extending textile life through better product design, more precise utilization and data-driven inventory management,” they say. “Reducing waste upstream often has a greater impact than recycling downstream.” Another way to reduce textile-related waste is to encourage hospitals and clinics to convert from single-use isolation gowns to reusable personal protective equipment (PPE).

Advancing Hospital Reusables

McCurdy says the adoption of reusable rather than disposable isolation gowns varies widely among her company’s healthcare clients. Still, the shortages in disposable iso gowns that struck during the COVID-19 pandemic have helped foster a trend toward expanded use of reusables. “Healthcare mandates and practices vary across different healthcare authorities,” McCurdy says. “PPE supplier-selection decisions are impacted by various factors, including sustainability, pricing, quality and reliability. Both reusable and disposable products continue to be used in care settings. In our experience, reusable isolation-gown usage has trended higher since the pandemic.”

Bryan and Randy likewise sounded a cautiously optimistic tone on the growing use of reusable iso gowns. “Yes, and we’ve already seen momentum in that direction, particularly coming out of the COVID

experience,” they say. “Some of this has been driven by the geopolitics of offshore single-use, disposables.”

They note further that moving from single-use disposables to reusable textiles isn’t just a policy decision—it’s also a clinical and operational one. “Infection-prevention standards, clinician acceptance and—most importantly—hospital-procurement policies and supply-chain decisions all play critical roles. “We expect continued, but gradual adoption, supported by both sustainability objectives and a desire for more resilient supply models. In some jurisdictions, we may see policy support or guidance that accelerates that shift, but ultimately it will be driven by demonstrated performance, safety and economics.”

Kerley notes that **TRSA** can play an important role in encouraging a transition in supply-chain models in favor of reusables. The association should also continue to lead legislative efforts in Ohio and other states to mandate a minimum 50-50 mix of reusable and disposable iso gowns in healthcare facilities. “We do see strong long-term potential for broader adoption of reusable isolation gowns and other reusable protective textiles in healthcare,” he says. “The value proposition is strong in terms of supply-chain resilience, waste reduction and cost management. Hospitals saw that more clearly during the pandemic. At the same time, adoption has not always moved quickly. The market has been slow to shift in some areas because of supply-chain operations and distribution models built around delivering single-use products to end users. Broader adoption will depend in part on improving those systems, and **TRSA** could help lead collaborative efforts to enhance end-user distribution to match or exceed current single-use distribution methods.”

Kerley adds that he expects state-level legislation to play a key

role in facilitating change. “Ongoing education on infection prevention, confidence in validated processing at Hygienically Clean-certified facilities, and policy support may help accelerate broader change, alongside hospital sustainability goals and operational priorities,” he says. “Associations like **TRSA** help give member companies a collective voice in those conversations. For example, recent advocacy around Ohio’s SB 344. The path may look a little different, depending on the state or local government, but the overall direction points toward greater interest in dependable reusable systems that support both performance and long-term value.”

Perils of PFAS

A related issue on the environmental-compliance front is that some iso gowns may contain a chemical additive in the form of per- and polyfluoroalkyl substances (PFAS). These substances comprise a large group of man-made chemicals used since the 1940s in products that resist heat, water, grease and stains. In April 2024, the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency determined that two types of PFAS, PFOA (Perfluorooctanoic Acid) and PFOS (Perfluorooctane sulfonate), are hazardous substances under the Comprehensive Environmental Response, Compensation, and Liability Act (CERCLA). Concerns over PFAS have also emerged in Europe and Canada. Bartsch notes that while the linen, uniform and facility services industry doesn’t produce PFAS, it’s nonetheless a concern if PFAS on garments or flatwork processed by laundries ends up in wastewater effluent. “PFAS is absolutely an emerging area of concern—and one the industry needs to take seriously, both from an environmental and a regulatory standpoint.”

While enforcement actions in many jurisdictions are still pending, operators should expect them sooner,

rather than later. “We are seeing a clear increase in regulatory focus, particularly around wastewater and effluent standards, even if enforcement timelines and thresholds are still evolving,” Bartsch says. “As with many environmental issues, regulation tends to follow awareness—and awareness around PFAS, both in public policy and in the broader

community, seems to be rising quickly.”

As a textile manufacturer, Kerley recommends that operators scrutinize their textile sources closely and take precautions to monitor any possible presence of PFAS on the textile goods that they’re processing. Standard Textile is also doing its part to monitor the issue. “The

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“ Sustainability, along with technology and culture, is becoming part of the emerging value proposition for talent. ”

management of PFAS and other harmful chemicals is a significant area of focus for Standard Textile,” he says. “We see requirements and expectations continuing to evolve through wastewater and product regulations, which do not always develop uniformly from state to state. In our view, it is less a question of whether requirements will continue to change than how they might change. Companies are better served by preparing early, improving visibility into materials and processes and investing in alternatives that support both performance and long-term readiness.”

McCurdy says K-Bro Linen views the PFAS issue as an important part of its broader focus on sustainability, coupled with regulatory compliance. “We’re supportive of efforts to implement sustainable chemistry throughout the industry,” she says. “We monitor international standards and regulatory developments and work with our partners to address anticipated changes. We follow applicable environmental regulations, and wastewater is safely treated in accordance with these regulations.”

Sustainability & Staffing

The company executives interviewed for this article are all committed not only to environmental compliance but to championing sustainability across all aspects of their operations. It’s often said that these efforts have a positive impact on recruiting and retaining staff, particularly millennials (born 1981-1996) and Gen Zs (born 1997-2012). Welch downplayed this idea, but he noted that broadly speaking, employees want to feel good about the organizations they work for. “Sustainability should be part of

every laundry’s brand,” he says. “It’s the very nature of what we do for a living (reusable vs. disposable). No employee wants to work for a firm that they don’t feel good about. But we don’t see any generation making employment decisions heavily influenced by this issue.”

For Tsolakoglou, a fifth-generation manager at Shasta Linen, embracing sustainability is a priority that he takes personally. “As a ‘Zillennial’ myself, I can see different attitudes toward sustainability depending on the age group,” he says. “I think millennials and Gen Zs are more concerned about the environment, as they have grown up with more education and awareness on the matter.” Younger people also will have to deal with the repercussions of climate change, he adds.

McCurdy notes that K-Bro’s focus on sustainability has positively impacted recruitment/retention of millennial and Gen Z staff and prospects. “Corporate sustainability profile is increasingly a consideration for attracting and retaining employees,” she says. “Younger demographics have been more vocal about the importance of sustainability to them. K-Bro’s current labor dynamics have been favorable and are supported by our ongoing commitment to environmental stewardship.”

Bartsch also agrees that sustainability is a plus for hiring—provided that the commitment is backed by sufficient resources to have an impact. “There is no question that sustainability resonates more strongly with younger employees and with younger customers,” he says. “For many in the millennial and Gen Z cohorts, environmental

responsibility is not a ‘nice to have’—it’s an expectation.”

Companies must make a genuine commitment to sustainability to reap the benefits of recruiting more and better candidates among millennial and Gen Z prospects. “Employees can quickly distinguish between meaningful action and messaging,” Bartsch says. Both Bryan and Randy agree that “Companies that integrate sustainability into their operations and culture tend to see stronger engagement and retention.”

Innovative Environmentalism

As companies look to the second half of 2026 and beyond, it’s clear that sustainability is high on the agenda for companies that favor corporate social responsibility. These companies also want to compete effectively in today’s linen, uniform and facility services market.

While policies and the emphasis on sustainability can shift with successive administrations, virtually no one expects the issue of “going green” to go away anytime soon. That means governments and the public will expect commercial laundries to continue improving their management of water, soil and air resources. In some cases, such as with reusable iso gowns, new government rules could help commercial laundries increase their market share relative to disposables in healthcare settings.

What’s more, companies that embrace sustainability can improve staff recruitment and retention, as well as their image with customers and prospects. Finally, by boosting efficiency, creative innovations in resource conservation can give companies a competitive edge in the 2020s and beyond. **TS**



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