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FTC targets faux-environmental claims of bamboo products

By Jeff Gelles
Inquirer Staff Writer

The textiles go by names such as "ecoKashmere," "Bamboo Comfort," and "Pure Bamboo." Products made with them - baby clothes, women's leggings, sweaters - tout a variety of environmental benefits, such as that they are nonpolluting, biodegradable, and retain some of bamboo's natural antimicrobial properties.

But yesterday the Federal Trade Commission said that at least four companies' versions of bamboo clothing have been marketed with claims made out of, well, whole cloth. It said the material is nothing more than rayon - a fiber made from cellulose in a process that involves harsh chemicals and releases hazardous pollutants.

The federal agency announced settlements with three of the companies, including Sami Designs L.L.C. of Wexford, Pa., near Pittsburgh. None acknowledged any wrongdoing, though all agreed to drop key marketing claims - including that their products are made of bamboo or bamboo fiber or are produced via environmentally friendly processes - unless they can substantiate them.

The FTC filed a complaint against the fourth company.

Lawyers for the FTC's Bureau of Consumer Protection made clear that they were not ruling out the possibility that bamboo might have been used in the products - just the companies' claims of its environmental significance.

"Regardless of the source of the cellulose, whether it's bamboo or plants or trees, the product that's actually manufactured is rayon," said Korin K. Ewing, an FTC lawyer involved in the case.

Not all the companies made all the same claims. The complaint against Sami Designs, which also uses the Jonano name, does not accuse it of claiming its bamboo-based products are biodegradable. But the FTC accused all of trying to cash in on the cachet of bamboo, a fast-growing plant that is a favorite of the sustainability movement.

Chris Pastore, a professor of textile engineering at Philadelphia University, said the chemicals used to make rayon have caused controversy since it was first produced in the 19th century.

"For a while in the United States, you couldn't make rayon because of the risks associated with it," Pastore said.

The FTC's cases against the companies are part of a growing fight against "greenwashing" - making an environmental claim about a product or service without adequate scientific evidence, he said.

"Sustainability is a big deal. Everybody is trying to show how they're greener than everyone else," Pastore said.

Bamboo is a natural candidate for greenwashed claims, Pastore said, partly because it bears a physical resemblance to flax, the plant used to make linen through a simple process that leaves its natural fibers largely intact.

"Flax looks like a reed, and bamboo looks like a giant reed. People just imagine it's the same process," he said.

But to make rayon, bamboo or any cellulose source is typically ground up, dissolved, and processed into a viscous liquid with chemicals such as the highly toxic carbon disulfide. "It's much more energy-intensive and much more polluting," he said.

Extracting a practical textile from bamboo, as linen is made from flax, is theoretically possible, Pastore said. But, like Ewing, he said it was not something he had seen.

"I just don't think we're seeing that on the market because it would be too expensive," Pastore said.

There are alternative choices for consumers seeking greener fabrics, he said - including some marketed by companies targeted yesterday by the FTC.

Sami Designs sells hemp and organic cotton, two products Pastore said were genuinely "environmentally friendly." Another such fabric is recycled polyester made from soda and water



Chris Pastore says bamboo is a natural candidate for greenwashed claims.

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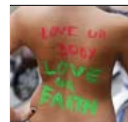
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year to meet FTC standards. She said they were now called "viscose from bamboo."

Pastore said that in textile manufacturing, *viscose* is a synonym for *rayon*.

Contact staff writer Jeff Gelles at 215-854-2776 or jgelles@phillynews.com.

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