

Corporations rethinking how they use water

By Leslie Kaufman, New York Times

SAN FRANCISCO – From the cotton field in rural India to the local rag bin, a typical pair of blue jeans consumes 919 gallons of water during its life cycle, Levi Strauss & Company says, or enough to fill about 15 spa-size bathtubs. That includes the water that goes into irrigating the cotton crop, stitching the jeans together and washing them scores of times at home.



The company wants to reduce that number any way it can, and not just to project environmental responsibility. It fears that water shortages caused by climate change may jeopardize the company's very existence in the coming decades by making cotton too expensive or scarce.

So to protect its bottom line, Levi Strauss has helped underwrite and champion a nonprofit program that teaches farmers in India, Pakistan, Brazil and West and Central Africa the latest irrigation and rainwater-capture techniques. It has introduced a brand featuring stone-washed denim smoothed with rocks but no water. It is sewing tags into all of its jeans urging customers to wash less and use only cold water.

To customers seeking further advice, Levi Strauss suggests washing jeans rarely, if at all – the theory being that putting them in the freezer will kill germs that cause them to smell.

Conservation worries are not limited to the clothing giants: food and beverage conglomerates, tobacco companies and metal and mining companies are all starting to reckon with their

heavy dependence on water. Pepsico, for example, has embraced a method of sanitizing plastic bottles with purified air instead of water at a plant in Georgia. For its Frito-Lay brands, it has identified drought-resistant potato strains that it provides to farmers along with a soil-monitoring method so that crops are watered only when necessary.

The Carbon Disclosure Project, a group that monitors corporations' greenhouse gas emissions, recently added water security to its priorities. Of the 150 companies that responded last year to a questionnaire that it sent to the world's largest corporations, nearly 40 percent reported that water problems had already resulted in "detrimental impacts" to their businesses.

The threat of water shortages was brought home to Levi Strauss last year when floods in Pakistan and parched fields in China destroyed cotton crops and sent prices soaring. Roughly two pounds of cotton go into every pair of jeans that the company manufactures. Although scientists are wary of linking specific extreme weather events to climate change, recent increases in floods and droughts are in line with patterns that experts have long projected would result from global warming. The general rule of thumb is that wet regions will get wetter and dry regions will become even more arid.

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