Memorandum

Date: December 8, 2010

To: Assistant Sustainability Coordinator, Maren Stumme-Diers

From: Kate Schletty and Elisabeth Haager

Re: Socially Responsible Clothing

Introduction

COTTON AND THE ENVIRONMENT
Cotton, which is native to Southern Africa and South America, is grown on over 90 million acres in more than 80 countries worldwide. The millions of tons of cotton produced each year account for 50% of the world's fiber needs (wool, silk and flax together account for 10%) and is widely used as livestock feed and in food products such as salad dressing and crackers. Despite cotton's image as being a natural and pure fiber, conventional cotton farming takes an enormous toll on the air, water, soil and people who live in cotton growing areas.

The growth of Industrial agriculture and consolidation in the seed industry has replaced hundreds of cotton varieties with only a handful. The practice of planting thousands of acres all of the same variety is known as monoculture and has left the crop extremely vulnerable to pests and diseases and forced cotton farmers onto what is known as the "chemical treadmill." Just 2.4% of the world's arable land is planted with cotton yet it accounts for 24% of the world's insecticide market and 11% of sale of global pesticides, making it the most pesticide-intensive crop grown on the planet. $2.6 Billion worth of pesticides are used on cotton worldwide each year. In California, five of the top nine pesticides used on cotton are cancer-causing chemicals (cyanazine, dicofol, naled, propargite and trifluralin). In Egypt, more than 50% of cotton workers in the 1990s suffered symptoms of chronic pesticide poisoning, including neurological and vision disorders. In India, 91% of male cotton workers exposed to pesticides eight hours or more per day experienced some type of health disorder, including chromosomal aberrations, cell death and cell cycle delay.

SWEAT SHOPS AND CLOTHING PRODUCTION
Sweatshop apparel, clothing and shoes produced in the United States and the global South under sub-standard labor and environmental conditions, is widely spreading. The availability of cheap, almost throwaway clothes that change with each fashion season has become deeply embedded in our culture and yet there is a face behind the $150 pair of Nike sneakers or the Kathie Lee blouse. Since it's now considered "too expensive" to pay a living wage and protect the environment, US, European, and Japanese textile and clothing manufacturers, have, for the most part, closed down production and moved to "outsource" their production overseas, preferably in the lowest-wage countries like Viet-Nam or China. Since women and children are the easiest to exploit, they are the preferred workers in these sweatshops. Rights of free speech, free association, and the right to form a trade union are routinely repressed. Water pollution, air pollution, social dislocation, economic exploitation--these are merely the "externalities" of the global marketplace.
**Background**

As part of my research, I asked many student groups on campus where they purchase their group t-shirts. The majority said that their purchases were through two stores in town, The Sport Shop, and Gallery of Tops. Student Activities and the Union is a large organization on campus with many smaller committees that each purchase t-shirts. However, Trish, the Coordinator of SAC said they purchase their shirts from Beaver Creek Graphix, in Fort Atkinson, Iowa, where they receive a good deal for having such a large purchase order. Each year SAC buys t-shirts for all SAC members, but each committee purchases and personalizes their committee shirts as well. Because Trish receives a deal from BC Graphix, she said would stick with BC Graphix when buying t-shirts for the whole group.

**Proposal**

We are asking students to raise awareness regarding the negative health and environmental effects of conventional and genetically engineered cotton and the institutionalized exploitation of clothing sweatshops. We are asking students to look into clothing companies that offer fair made clothing with organic cotton, and to ultimately purchase clothing from these companies for student groups on campus to further support the cause and raise awareness.

**Rationale**

“Why should I care?” is the most important question we can ask ourselves. The majority of human beings are emotional and moral beings. We see something that is morally wrong, and we react to it in some way, whether it is a positive or negative reaction, we do so because we are incapable of not reacting. But because we are rational beings (although in this case, seemingly irrational) we can learn to override our initial emotional reactions and behave as detached observers, seeing ourselves separate from the wrongdoing and the victim(s) of the wrongdoing. While emotional reactions are inevitable, this detachment takes effort.

The majority of consumers are no longer able to see the connection to the people producing their clothing or the environmental impacts of the production, but we’re not the only ones at fault. The companies selling us our clothing don’t want us to know the labor conditions of the people producing our clothing or the severely harmful effects it has on their lives and the health of the environment. They are putting a great deal of effort forth in order to shield us from that knowledge. We are asking students on campus to learn about where their clothing comes from, and when they do learn, to not make the conscious effort to look past it and become an intentionally detached consumer.

**Next Steps**

1) We will be adding a “Socially Responsible Clothing” page to Luther’s Sustainability site in the near future, hopefully January of 2011. The specifics of the page have yet to be decided on. However, at the very least, it will inform students of the current issues regarding clothing production and the severely harmful effects it can have on the lives of those producing the clothing as well as our environment. The site will also be a good reference to students and or student groups who are interested in purchasing their clothing from socially responsible companies, as there will be a list of companies that sell clothing Fair Made with 100% Organic Cotton, Fair Made with some Organic Cotton and other eco-friendly products, or solely Fair Made clothing.
2) Upon completion of the Socially Responsible Clothing addition to the Sustainability site, the next step will be to contact Student Life, Trish Neubauer, and notify her of the updated site so she can send out a message to student groups on campus.

3) The final step could only be accomplished through the success of student groups taking an interest in purchasing socially responsible clothing. This could take more time than many of the current students have left at Luther College. But if someone were to continue on with this project, I think it would make a substantial difference if a store in town saw enough of a demand for socially responsible clothing from student groups on campus and could purchase a large order of clothing from one company. This would create a structure that would allow for the interest from student groups to continue to grow, and create even more publicity on the matter of socially responsible clothing.