
North Face grows its Backyard Project with California-made hoodies

By Nerissa Pacio Itchon | March 13, 2016 | Updated: March 14, 2016 7:53pm

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Photo: The North Face

The North Face's latest Backyard Project Collection features medium-weight men's and women's full-zip hoodies and pullovers made from materials grown, designed, cut and sewn in California.

Whether considered a workout essential, tech-worker uniform or weekend slacker staple, the iconic hoodie has gotten yet another boost from outdoor apparel and equipment giant the North Face.

In keeping with the conscious consumerism trend, the brand, headquartered in Alameda, has expanded its original Backyard Project launched in 2014 with the goal of producing an all-cotton unisex hoodie from materials grown, designed, cut and sewn within 150 miles of the Bay Area.



“The first time around, we were pretty successful, but we didn’t actually hit that goal,” says James Rogers, sustainability manager for the North Face. “Mainly because some of the infrastructure to make a pure cotton hoodie didn’t exist within the radius we had set for ourselves.”

The initial run of limited-edition, oatmeal-hued, full-zip hoodies that quickly sold out were made from California-grown cotton and produced in San Leandro; however, due to the lack of cotton mills in Northern California, the cotton had to be spun and knitted in the Carolinas.

This year, the brand challenged itself again to partner with local growers and artisans to create a domestically made product, but with lowered prices and a wider assortment, says Rogers. To that end, the brand moved production from the East Bay to Los Angeles, where there’s a more robust apparel industry, allowing a 15-fold increase in production.

The result is the North Face’s latest Backyard Project Collection featuring ultra-soft, medium-weight men’s and women’s full-zip hoodies, pullover hoodies and short-sleeve graphic T-shirts emblazoned with the “Grown and Sewn in the USA” logo. The expanded collection will be sold online and at full-priced North Face stores nationwide.

The pilot collection produced roughly 2,000 hoodies as compared to the 16,963 garments manufactured more than a year later. The new collection also offers eight new colors versus the original project's single heather brown.

A larger run meant sweatshirt pricing could drop by 20 percent, from \$125 to \$90 for a full zip and \$80 for a pullover, making them comparably priced to hoodies sold by J. Crew, Levi's and American Giant.

The collection's all-cotton T-shirts, which were not produced for the pilot, retail for \$40 each, slightly higher than the brand's cotton-polyester blend T-shirts that average between \$25 and \$35.

One standout vintage-looking T-shirt design features a sketch of a California farm with cotton plants in the foreground and hills in the background, inspired by the original project's connection to the local farming community.

This year's production also had greater environmental impact by shifting to more sustainable practices for the cotton treatment and garment dyeing processes.

A more efficient cationic cotton treatment helped the fiber attract the dye to lock it into the fabric more readily, and dyeing only the final assembled garments produced less waste, says Rogers.

"You're not spending energy and chemistry dyeing fabric before it's cut and sewn," he says.

Although the majority of the North Face products continues to be manufactured in 33 countries, including the U.S., Rogers says there are plans to evolve and grow the Backyard Project Collection in years to come.

"It's interesting for people to hear about a large global company like the North Face creating a localized product," Rogers says. "It's the old way of doing things. It's a challenge to do now because a lot of the infrastructure is just not there, and that was a learning process for us. But people really like that story and they like to know where their

products come from.”

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