

L.L. Bean and their lack of transparency

By Elli Einset

L.L. Bean has been at the forefront of controversy amongst the climate community for the past several years when Linda Bean, the granddaughter of the namesake of the company, supported Donald Trump in the 2016 election.

Since this, there has been speculation about the integrity of the company since their stance on the climate tends to align more with Democratic party. Many advocates have been protesting the L.L. Bean as they campaign that the business focuses on being environmentally friendly, but many fashion blogs and climate advocates claim that they “greenwash” instead.

According to [Investopedia](#), “greenwashing is the process of conveying a false impression or misleading information about how a company’s products are environmentally sound.”

On the ‘Sustainability’ part of their website, L.L. Bean claims, “We’re on a constant mission to care for all of our stakeholders: our customers, employees, vendors, communities and the natural environment.” However, the company has not spent any money on lobbying this year and in 2023 meanwhile L.L. Bean’s main competitor, Patagonia spent [\\$40,000](#) in 2020.

Frances McSherry, a professor in global fashion at Northeastern, said, “I was looking [L.L. Bean] up [on the [Fashion Transparency Index](#)] and it turns out that they are 8% transparent

which is not very good in comparison to some of the other outdoor gear companies like North Face and Patagonia, so they have a long way to go.”



A percentage dial of 8%, representing the amount transparency L.L. Bean is, according to Fashion Transparency Index. Graph created by Elli Einset.

L.L. Bean is not open about where they buy their supplies, but their current president and CEO Stephen Smith has a [history](#) with Chinese companies as he mostly worked with them when he used to work for Walmart.

Tom Mikulka, the co-founder of Third Act Working Group Maine, said, “It turns out that L.L. Bean was having their organic cotton shirts or clothing made in China by Chinese slaves.”

The 80-year-old activist explained in China there are prison camps that house Uyghurs, a religious group, who make these cotton clothing for the company.

“They say, ‘We monitor these places and we can assure you that we know that they're not exploiting people and child labor,’” said Mikulka, “When [an] investigative group asked L.L. Bean for documentation that they actually do visit these sites. They did not have any.”

Aside from this being an ethical issue, this also leads to an environmental problem as this travel leads to unnecessary greenhouse emissions.

“Not everything is just about the textiles or the fibers I find in sustainability,” said McSherry.

“There’s also where it was manufactured and where they sourced things and how far their mill is.”



Third Act Maine protesting outside L.L. Bean headquarters. Photo Courtesy Bill Nixon.

The organic cotton grown within the United States is more expensive than buying the same materials abroad, which is why many companies choose to buy from these companies with poor conditions rather than within the U.S.

“The U.S. doesn't support organic cotton farms in the way that they should. They should be subsidizing farms for [those] who are converting or who have converted to organic cotton because there's so much wrong with genetically modified cotton that we aren't paying attention to,” said McSherry. “And there's many farms that are GMO cotton and the damage that has

happened to the soil, to the air and to other crops in the area, it's really bad...And if only the U.S. government would just give that incentive because the prices are different. Organic cotton is more expensive but that's only because we haven't made more of the farms organic.

Patagonia makes a point that they [track](#) where their materials come from, inside and outside the United States. Patagonia also [joined](#) the Fair Labor Association task force in 1999, which targets to end child labor, forced labor, harassment of any kind and racial discrimination. This company also cut down their number of suppliers world-wide from 108 to 45.

“When [Patagonia] found out that their organic cotton was sourced from China [and] was being harvested by slave labor,” said Mikulka. “They got out of the business right away. So they were monitoring it. And so L.L. Bean talks a good game there, but they've never produced any real evidence that they do monitor it. “

In addition to their manufacturing concerns with the environment, their campaign of sustainability coincides with their partnership with Citibank. The organization is the [second-largest](#) investor of fossil fuels since the beginning of the Paris Agreement. According to [Banking on Climate Chaos](#), Citigroup has spent \$396.3 billion since the treaty.

In June of 2023, Mikulka sent a letter to Smith asking to end their relationship with Citibank, or at the very least, ask Citibank publicly to be more sustainable within their company. This letter was the only letter response that Third Act received from Smith directly as he did not answer Mikulka's follow up letter.

“His statement is saying, yeah, they're aligned with Citibank who funds new fossil fuel infrastructure,” said Bill Rixon, 78, a climate activist and member of Third Act. “He's okay with that because it allows them to make a lot of money to then put on this greenwashing campaign saying that they support the National Park Service and the Nature Conservancy.”

This was one of two interactions from Smith, with the final interaction was when Smith walked up to Rixon who was protesting outside their headquarters with a banner that had ‘Protect Mother Earth’ on it.

“He came up, just wanted to talk. And I think I remember [that] we both agreed that it was all about finance,” said Rixon. “He basically was saying that they had no influence on Citibank or that it was [a] way larger situation than anything that L.L. Bean could ever address. I can't remember specifically what he said. As he was leaving, he looked up at my banner...and he said, ‘We're really both on the same side.’ And I just bit my tongue and didn't say anything.”

Before the deal with Citibank, L.L. Bean was partnered with Barclays, a British banking company. Due to the relationship between the two companies, the bank added a credit card processing center in Maine, bringing in a lot of jobs for the natives.

“Obviously, L.L. Bean got a better deal from Citibank,” said Mikulka. “And they dumped Barclays and those Maine jobs were lost. So as a result of them making the decision to go with Citibank, they cost Maine jobs.”

While L.L. Bean has a long way to go to improve their damage to the planet – thus stopping their greenwashing, they have

“We have spent about 20 years enjoying fast fashion and kind of not paying attention to what the results are,” said McSherry. “We are now starting to learn the bad part and understand more not only about the kind of pollution and the bad labor practices...I think in the case of L.L. Bean, it's important for them to up their game to start to look for new sources of textiles. We're not shipping stuff and polluting our oceans, but also to understand that there are, there have been and there continue to be mills and farms here in the U.S. that we have largely neglected.”

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