



Eagan company Storm Creek makes big shift to producing clothing from recycled plastic



Doug Jackson & Teresa Fudenberg



At first glance, Storm Creek's showroom in Eagan looks like many other clothing shops, featuring racks of outdoorsy quarter-zips, jackets and shirts.

Storm Creek CEO and owner Teresa Fudenberg, however, will quickly show what makes the lifestyle apparel brand different: a tag that discloses how many "upcycled" plastic bottles went into making each item. Every "Overachiever" full-zip jacket, vest and pullover, for example, contains as many as 22 to 42 recycled bottles.

More than 32 million recycled bottles have gone into Storm Creek garments since the company began tracking the total in October 2019. That was three years after Fudenberg fully committed to sourcing "eco-friendly" materials and instituting sustainable production practices. As of 2023, 75% of all the fabrics in Storm Creek apparel are recycled, with other materials including bamboo-based fabric and organic cotton. The company is on track to upcycle 50 million plastic bottles by the end of 2024.



Overachiever Jacket
22-42 upcycled bottles per garment

“The plastic problem is huge,

over 600 billion plastic water bottles a year," Fudenberg said. "The average American throws away 80 pounds of clothing a year; there's not a lot of recycling [of clothes]. . . . What warms my heart is to be able to wake up in the morning and have purpose to what you're doing."

Storm Creek primarily sells promotional apparel bearing company logos that businesses buy through distributors in lots of hundreds or thousands. Those businesses then give the branded items to employees or customers.

Storm Creek's customers include Vail Resorts nationally as well as Minnesota Horse & Hunt Club in Prior Lake, Velaasa in Woodbury, Giants Ridge golf and ski resort in Biwabik and Reeds Family Outdoor Outfitters in Walker and Onamia. Fudenberg said "almost every" Fortune 500 company has bought Storm Creek products through promotional apparel distributors. The showroom, usually reserved for local or visiting retail buyers, is open for public sales two times a year, in spring and fall. Individual customers can also buy items directly on Storm Creek's website.

Sustainability wasn't always at the forefront of the nearly 40-year-old brand's business model, though. It took Fudenberg joining a decade ago — plus her unique partnership with founder and president Doug Jackson — to revamp the company and keep it current with modern priorities.

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Building the brand

Fudenberg joined Storm Creek in 2014, having worked with entrepreneurs while running her own brand and business strategy company for more than two decades. At Storm Creek — which became a certified women-owned business with her arrival — she leads strategy, business and the people side of the company, which has 40 employees.

Her skills complement those of Jackson, who oversees product, sales, suppliers and supply chain. Their business partnership has since become personal, with the two eventually marrying after Fudenberg joined the company.

"Within a week of us meeting each other, I said, 'You should run the business. You would do a great job of running this,'" Jackson said. "And she does."

What would become Storm Creek started in 1995, when Jackson founded a company that produced outdoor apparel. Storm Creek switched to a business-to-business model in 2006, producing private-label products for other companies to sell. Fudenberg, however, wanted distributors and buyers who bought Storm Creek products and the people who received them to know they were Storm Creek products.

“ I come from a background of branding, **building brands**, and building businesses. It was a great opportunity to take **what I had been looking for** as something to put my energy into and **build the brand of Storm Creek.** ”

-Teresa Fudenberg

Educating for sustainability, sales

To help buyers and distributors explain the company's mission to their customers, Fudenberg launched "Storm Creek Sustainability School."

She will make multiple Sustainability School presentations this year at trade shows and elsewhere. Such sessions touch on alternatives to plastic products and tips on recycling plastics. The plastic bottles that go into creating Storm Creek garments first break down into plastic flakes, then beads, and ultimately, those turn into polyester fibers. Production for most of the fabric and garments happens overseas.

"We talk about sustainability with all of our channels so that people can help educate others, whether it's consumers or business customers, about the importance of thinking twice when they select apparel, something that won't end up in the landfill, is sustainably made, ethically made, all of that," Fudenberg said.

Storm Creek apparel "sells like crazy" when buyers visit the Eagan showroom, Jackson said. With a "shoestring" marketing budget, educating more buyers and distributors is critical to expanding sales.

Fudenberg declined to specify a revenue figure but said sales have grown 15-20% a year in the past couple years. Sales soared 40% in 2021, when Storm Creek, unlike other promotional apparel companies, had plenty of inventory as corporations bought gifts for employees working at home during the pandemic and resorts began reopening.

Community giving

Fudenberg and Jackson both emphasize giving back. Storm Creek has made more than \$2 million in donations toward its goal of giving \$5 million to charity by 2030. It has joined 1% for the Planet, contributing at least that share of revenue to environmental causes. It also enrolled in the Minnesota Keystone Program, donating cash or in-kind products equal to 5% of pre-tax earnings to charitable endeavors.

Such efforts contributed to Fudenberg's recognition in July as the Bess Cohn Humanitarian of the Year for 2023, from the Advertising Specialty Institute, a promotional products industry trade group.

"Our mission is better products for the greater good," Fudenberg said. "Sustainably made, high quality, so it fits and lasts, and you're not going to throw it away. That's why we're getting so much traction in the industry. That's how we've carved out that niche."

By **Todd Nelson** Special to the Star Tribune

