

INFORMATION CONTENT OF TEXTILE LABELS IN THE UNITED STATES, CANADA, AND EUROPE

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ABSTRACT: While often overlooked, textile labels are an important source of information regarding the manufacture, location and distribution of textiles such as garments, carpets and upholsteries. Three main public laws govern the labelling of textiles in the United States: The Wool Products Labeling (WPL) Act of 1939, The Textile Fiber Products Identification Act of 1960 (TFPIA), and the Federal Trade Commission rule titled “Care Labeling of Textile Wearing Apparel and Certain Piece Goods” of 1972. Additional rules also affect the information content of textile labels, such as the Fur Products Labeling Act of 1951. These laws apply to all domestic and imported textiles. Canada and Europe have similar laws but vary in their requirements for information content.

The three US federal laws require five specific items of information to be contained on garment and piece good labels: Fibre content by name, fibre composition by percent of total fabric weight, manufacturer’s name, country of origin, and care instructions. The first four of these must also appear on other textile products. The generic name of the fibre types present in quantities greater than 5% must be listed on a label; the definitions for these generic names are specified in the TFPIA.

The coding of manufacturers through their WPL or Registered Numbers (RN) can be important in tracking down the distribution and manufacturing characteristics of a garment. Understanding the differences between phrases such as “Made in the USA” and “Made in the USA of imported yarn” can greatly affect the success of tracing a garment. Variations between US, Canadian, and European label content can be important in determining the country of origin and understanding the textile’s composition. An example label is shown below.

KEY WORDS: Fibres; Textiles; Labelling.

Problems of Forensic Sciences, vol. XLVI, 2001, 222–229

Received 15 May 2001; accepted 15 September 2001

INTRODUCTION

Although they are typically the focus of a forensic investigation involving fibres, textiles contain information beyond their composition and construction. Labelling is an important part of textile manufacturing, distribution and world-wide marketing. Labels are the only way to reliably identify a designer or maker of a textile, particularly as styles and seasons change. La-

bels and tags also help consumers to identify products that they know and choose to purchase or avoid. To the forensic fibre examiner, labels can be an important source of many types of information that can help track a textile to its production source or possibly help in assessing its significance.

APPLICABLE LAWS

In the United States, several laws govern the labelling of textiles. The Wool Products Act enacted on October 14, 1940 (amended May 5, 1980 and March 16, 1998), the Textile Fiber Products Act enacted on September 2, 1958 (amended March 16, 1998), and the Care Labeling Rule enacted on December 16, 1971 (amended May 13, 1983 and July 1, 1997) are the main laws that detail textile labelling. In Canada, it is the Textile Labeling Act (enacted December 13, 1971, amended 1996) and for the European Union, it is Directive 96/74/EC of the European Parliament (amended by 397L0037); each member of the European Union may have additional regulations specific to that country. Table I outlines the major requirements by country; note that outside of these requirements, companies are free to add any other information that they desire (Figure 1).

Fig. 1. Additional information is at the discretion of the manufacturer.

TABLE I. REQUIREMENTS BY COUNTRY

	Content	Wt. Pct.	Pct. Var.	Country of origin	Care instructions	Manufacture ID	Size	Language required
FTC	Yes	≥ 5%	± 3%	Yes*	Yes	Yes	No	English
U.S. customs	Yes	≥ 5%	± 3%	Yes**	Yes	Yes	No	English
Canada	Yes	≥ 5%	± 5%	No	No	Yes	No	English/French
Europe	Yes	≥ 10%	± 3%	No	No	Yes	No	English/other
Mexico	Yes	≥ 5%	± 3%	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Spanish

*Finished product; **Unfinished components.

WPL AND RN

Rather than take up the space on a tag with the name of the manufacturer, their address, telephone number(s) and other information, numbers have been assigned in the USA to textile manufactures. Originally called Wool Products Label, or WPL after the Act that legislated their use, these numbers code the information identifying the manufacturer. Wool Products Label numbers were issued from 1941 to 1959; after this, new numbers were assigned as Registered Numbers (RN). Therefore, if an examiner sees a garment with a WPL number, they know that the garment was either 1) made prior to 1959, or 2) the manufacturer has been in business since that time. Canada, accordingly, assigns “CA” numbers (Figure 2). The tags themselves may carry identification numbers for the tag manufacturers (Figure 3). This may help narrow the search for a garment’s source, as not all textile manufacturers use the same tag manufacturers. Additionally, some textiles have tags from multiple companies. For further information regarding specific labelling requirements, visit www.ftc.gov for a listing of WPL and RN numbers; www.strategis.ic.gc.ca/cpd for a listing of Canadian manufacturing numbers; www.customs.gov, for regulations of United States Customs Service; www.astm.org for standards about labelling and information content, and www.europa.eu for information about the European Union.

“MADE IN...”

The phrases “Made in the USA” and “Constructed in the USA” may initially sound similar but their technical definitions are very different. The US Federal Trade Commission uses the following definitions for these standard phrases: Made in the USA – products made solely in the USA; Made in ... –

Fig. 2. Example of RN and CA numbers.

Fig. 3. Tag manufacturer numbers.

products made solely abroad; Made in USA of imported material – manufacturing of product is entirely in USA of foreign materials; Made in..., Made in USA – manufacturing of product occurs both in the USA and abroad (Figure 4).

Fig. 4. Multiple manufacturers.

In deciding, therefore, whether to mark a product as made in whole or in part as “Made in the USA”, a manufacturer must consider only the origin of the materials that are one step removed from that particular manufacturing process. This is the so-called “One Step Removed Rule”. For example, a yarn manufacturer must identify imported fibres or a manufacturer of knitted garments must identify imported yarn. The manufacturing process may therefore become complicated. If one yarn of a plied yarn is produced in one country and the other yarn is produced in a second country, and the yarns are twisted to form a cable, then, assuming both yarns are equal in the final product, the country in which the yarns are twisted together is the country of origin because each yarn is equally important and you have to resort to the last country in which an important processing occurred.

If a prior agreement exists between countries, however, a different answer may result. Take a comforter as an example. China is the country of ori-

gin of the comforter shell and of the down used to fill it. Both of these components are then shipped to Canada for assembly and the down is inserted into the shells. The country of origin of the finished comforter is then listed as China. However, because the processing occurs in Canada (a North American Free Trade Agreement – NAFTA country) satisfies the NAFTA duty preference rule, the country of origin could then be listed as Canada, if a claim is made for duty preference at the time of entry (or within one year). This type of complexity in trade matters only complicates the search for a textile's source (Figure 5).

Fig. 5. Textiles may be difficult to trace to their source.

In Europe, the rules are no less complicated and specific. A textile described as “100%” of a fibre type may contain up to 2% by weight of other fibres, provided this is for technical reasons and not just lack of quality control; this allowance is increased to 5% for carded textiles. A textile made up of two or more fibre types, one of which accounts for at least 85% of the total weight must have that fibre type listed with its percentage weight, or with the words, “85% minimum”, or the full percentage composition of all fibre types in the product. Decorative fibres comprising less than 7% of the weight of the textile need not be listed. If none of the fibre types are at least 85% by weight in the textile, then at least two of the main fibre types and their weight percentages must be listed, followed by the names of the other constituent fibres in descending order of weight with or without an indication of their weight. The exception, and there always is at least one, is for bras-

sieres, corsets, and corselets which must have the description and percentage weight of all fibre types composing them; unless than 10% by weight of the garment, then they need not be listed at all! The interested fabric examiner is best directed to the specific laws and regulations for the country in question; the previously listed websites contain the most current information.

COMMON VIOLATIONS

Violations of these labelling laws can carry harsh fines. The most common violations are removal of country of origin labels and then replacing them with "Made in USA" labels, failure to include care instructions, and failure to have reasonable basis for care instructions. These two towels are from the same manufacturer but the "pink" towel was washed 50 times (Figure 6); the manufacturer may not have provided care instructions that had a reasonable basis given the materials used ("Do not use bleach", for example). Given that tags and labels may be removed and replaced with misleading or false ones, examiners should record the tag information carefully and contact the suspected manufacturer for further identifying information.

Fig. 6. Lack of reasonable basis for care instructions.

CONCLUSIONS

Textile labels are an often-overlooked source of data to assist the forensic textile examiner. The labels' content, both legislated and actual, can aid the examiner in determining the source of a garment, its distribution, and its genuineness. A number of on-line sources are available to assist the forensic examiner in hunting down and making sense of the information content of textile labels.