



THE ASSOCIATION & VOICE OF THE US SEWN PRODUCTS INDUSTRY

## SEAMS/SPESA webinar

# **'It's a new day, a new time'**

*U.S. textile industry proving its mettle during crisis*

By Devin Steele

Over the last few weeks, the sewn products, textiles and apparel industry and many of its suppliers have demonstrated all that is possible when everyone comes together with a common purpose to address a major crisis.

And for this industry in the U.S., the possibilities appear endless.

That was one of the major takeaways from a webinar Tuesday hosted jointly by SEAMS, The Association & Voice of the U.S. Sewn Products Industry, and SPESA, The Sewn Products Equipment & Suppliers of the Americas. The event attracted 176 viewers.

During the webinar, titled “Supply Chain Dynamics Amid COVID-19,” leaders of four companies involved in the industry’s drastic turn into Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) production for frontline healthcare heroes and the general public covered the challenges and opportunities this “pivot” has presented, as well as some of the backstory that pushed them to answer this call.

Speakers included Colin Holloway, senior manager, Global Innovation at HanesBrands; Frank Henderson, president and CEO at Henderson Sewing Machine Co.; Jeoff Bodenhorst Jr., president of LA Corp and of SEAMS; and Ron Roach, president of Contempora Fabrics and secretary/treasurer of SEAMS. SEAMS Executive Director Will Duncan and SPESA President Michael McDonald moderated.

Each presenter explained how he got involved in the effort. Holloway, who splits his time between Hanes’ office in Winston-Salem, N.C., and its facility on N.C. State’s Centennial Campus, is now involved in the global brand’s shift into PPE production, he said. Hanes is part of a coalition of several textile companies and apparel brands formed last month through collaboration with the White House and the National Council of Textile Organizations (NCTO).

The company, Holloway said, switched gears in several areas to now focus day-to-day on various types of face masks and other PPE such as gowns and scrubs.

“It’s been a shift for us,” he said. “Fortunately, we have a robust supply chain and some great people who are able to pivot quickly to address the local and global community when it comes to putting things into people’s hands, whether it’s the general public or healthcare workers, to help flatten the curve.”

Cut-and-sew contractor LACorp, based in Lebanon, Va., is also part of the Hanes coalition and is currently producing face masks and reusable gowns and is working on production lines for disposable gowns, other types of N95 masks and waterproof hospital bed covers, according to Bodenhorst, who also serves as SEAMS’ president.



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In stepping up during this crisis, LACorp has pivoted almost 90 percent of its production to PPE endeavors, he said. “Our world is turned upside down right now, just like everyone else’s is,” he said.

Another member of the coalition, Contempora Fabrics, a Lumberton, N.C.-based knitter, saw its normal apparel business abruptly decline the week of March 16 when the crisis started to heavily impact the Western Hemisphere, with Central American companies where it ships a lot of its fabric shuttering operations, Roach said.

“During that week, every hour, something changed,” he recalled. “You couldn’t plan anything for the next day. By the end of that week, for the first time in my 35-year career, we had to lay off 185 people on that Friday.”

But things began to rapidly change with the coalition beginning to form over the next couple of days and, by Tuesday of the following week, Contempora had reopened operations with about half of its plant personnel, he said.

Henderson is third generation leader of family-owned Andalusia, Alabama based Henderson Sewing Machine Co., which supplies equipment and technology as well as systems integration tools such as robotics and automation systems and standard sewing systems. His company’s primary role has been to serve as a “conduit” of information to connect the right players together, he said.

“We’ve been drinking from a fire hose the last three and a half weeks,” said Henderson, who is a member of SEAMS and SPESA. “We’ve probably learned more about manufacturing face masks and PPE than we ever have. It has been a quick study and an interesting proposition, but I think our industry was up to the challenge.”

## LA Corp

LACorp began to see its business deteriorate about four weeks ago, but the demand for PPE was beginning to rise at the same time, Bodenhorst said.

“Fortunately we have been involved in a diverse range of products, so we have a pretty extensive list of contacts and people reaching out to us,” he said. “Through the SEAMS network, we received quite a few calls and did a lot of research for the organization as well as for our own business.”

On Monday, April 13, the company had its first shipment of PPE ready to go – a pallet of 22,500 face masks, and the company should have another pallet ready by next week, he said. LA Corp’s first gown line is in production now, too, he added.

“We’re hoping to start shipping by the end of the week to one customer on gowns, and adding another customer next week,” Bodenhorst said. “Everybody wants more capacity, everybody wants more of our floor space. We’re shooting for somewhere in the neighborhood over 30,000 masks a week and somewhere around 6,000 to 10,000 gowns a week.”



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The company also has been approached about producing protective mattress coverings, he noted. Part of its business already is in mattress and bedding, and there are various groups looking for waterproof, vinyl hospital bed-type coverings, so LACorp is looking into that, he noted.

"I'm turning down enough requests today than I probably do in a year's time," Bodenhorst said. "It is incredible the amount of people reaching out to us. We can't keep up with it all because, if you have sewing machines in the United States right now, those machines are working. Demand has well exceeded capacity for skilled cut-and-sew labor in the U.S."

One of the challenges for LACorp's leadership is simply "education," he said, especially around keeping team members informed about what's going on.

"That has been very important to us," he said. "They expect us to be leaders during this time, they expect us to have accurate information and, many times, it's hard to decipher what's actually going on through the news stories. And it's our responsibility to let them know what's going on to try to have as safe a working environment as possible. Extreme social distancing is difficult in a cut-and-sew plant, but we've been accomplishing that, having our machines six to eight feet apart."

Having a general education on the new products has been a steep hill to climb, as well Bodenhorst said.

"There are so many barriers to entry because this has not been made domestically in any real capacity in so long," he said. "There are FDA guidelines and testing requirements. Most of us who are actively involved in this now are getting the low-hanging fruit – the things that don't have to be accredited and certified and maybe not be for a surgical audience. But they can certainly help out on the frontlines, with a level 1 type of gown or a mask for a consumer to wear to the grocery store. Those sorts of things are needed, too. I think most of us are already positioning ourselves to see what some longer-term opportunities can be."

Being a part of SEAMS and other industry organizations during this time has been extremely beneficial when it comes to education and information exchange, Bodenhorst added.

"The networking has been absolutely incredible – sharing ideas, sharing patterns, sharing different constructions, etc.," he said. "For instance, I'm taking pictures of setups and sending it to members across the country."

"We're all in this together and we all have the same goal," he said. "Luckily, we as an industry, are seeing some bright points right now. Most businesses are really struggling, whereas in our business we are trying to hire people right now just to keep up with demand."

Bodenhorst added that the greatest thing that's happened over the last few weeks has been the collaboration in the industry.

"I've been introduced to so many new companies that I didn't even know existed," he said. "That's partly through my exposure to SEAMS. You learn by doing this that there is a much wider breadth of partners and companies in communities throughout America – small partners and large partners. We



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have to improve that collaboration, and we have to get that supply chain running. We're not all always competitors. We're much stronger together."

## Henderson Sewing Machine Co.

Meanwhile, Henderson said he had something of a heads-up about the possibility of a global crisis while visiting Japan in early January. He was supposed to meet two friends in the Osaka airport, but they never showed up, he said. So he called them.

"I learned that they were in quarantine for 14 days after coming back from China," he said. "They told me what was transpiring in Wuhan, and what China was experiencing. So that immediately threw up a red flag for me. I returned home and told my team, 'folks, there is something that might be coming here that we need to be prepared for.' "

Soon, he began receiving numerous queries such as "where can I find nonwoven fabrics?" and "how do I make masks?" so Henderson said he began to see his company's role in the fight as a channel of information as well as a provider of equipment and systems for PPE production.

"We brought our staff together and said, 'team, we all need to work now, but in order to do that, we need to be safe here,' he said. "So everyone who walks into our building in the last four weeks has their temperature taken before they can enter. And they wear gloves and N95 masks. I have N95 masks because I have friends in the rest of the world who sent them to us. A local nursing home here in town had no masks, so we sent about 240 of them to help."

Today, Henderson Sewing has placed 27 automated face mask systems in 14 states – from Maine to California, as well as in Canada – to produce face masks in a vertically integrated supply chain, starting with fabric through the folding process to ultrasonically cut, seal and attach to products that are packed either in singles or fives and 10s up to 20s for shipment, he said.

"We're already looking at Version 2 of those supply chains now in changing those systems to servos, steppers, drives and those kind of things to make them even more productive and efficient," Henderson said.

Like his fellow speakers during the webinar, Henderson said he is putting in more time now than he ever has in order to answer the nation's call.

"I haven't worked very many seven days and seven nights over the last 45 years, but I certainly have over the last three or four weeks," he said. "I'm on about 20 regular calls a day and six or seven conference calls a day."

But the reward has been enormous as he sees a lifelong dream becoming a reality, he added.

"For us, it's a joy to see our industry activated in a completely vertical supply chain here in America, with everybody working together the way we have been," Henderson said. "Some of us have been waiting most of our lives to see this happen. For me it's been 45 years – 45 years of seeing our industry gutted and decimated and shipped all over the world, to now being able to say these are essential



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items needed in America. These are essential items for the health and wellbeing of our people. And I hope our government will tune in to see that these products are just as essential as a military uniform or ammunition. Why aren't these items Berry compliant also? I think it's a question we all have to ask going forward.

"I think for each of us, it's a new day, a new time, and it's an opportunity for each one of us to share, one with the other, and also I hope it's an opportunity for us to build this vertical supply chain for things that some of us have waited a long, long time to see come back here to America," he continued. "We can do that and we can compete with the rest of the world if we're equally yoked – not unequally yoked. But it's hard to do that if a government is subsidizing an industry and trying to push many of us out of business and out of the speed-to-market-type of scenario."

## Contempora Fabrics

For Contempora Fabrics, just about everything it is making now is either military fabrics or fabric for masks or gowns, Roach said. Currently, the company is producing about 200,000 yards a week of fabric for masks or gowns with DWR (durable water repellent) or with antimicrobial finishes, he noted.

The company also is producing about 200,000 masks per week now, with hopes to increase that to 300,000 per week, he said.

"We're primarily a fabric manufacturer, and we've taken one garment order in my 35-year career here, which didn't go very well," Roach said. "So now we're making masks and fabric for an industry that is going into PPE. We didn't really understand this area, so we're going through that learning curve, where all of a sudden we're buying elastic or buying nonwovens or utilizing this person who we didn't even know. That's been a big learning curve. Similarly, in our fabric business, we do use a lot of antibacterial and DWR finishes. But you can't necessarily take those type of finishes that are going into apparel and apply them to a face mask. But we're learning. Thankfully, (fellow SEAMS member) Carolina Cotton Works has been a big help with this, as were a lot of their chemical suppliers."

In asking half of its employee base to return to work after shutting down for three days, Roach said that health and safety was leadership's top concern.

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"If we couldn't bring them back safely, then we were not going to operate – plain and simple," he said. "But since that time, we have installed portable sinks, so now there are all kinds of areas to wash hands. And we've put a large tent outside so people can take breaks scattered over five or six tables. And, also, we've reiterated everything that we're being told to do these days, whether it's social distancing or washing hands."

During these long days, Roach said he has joked to his management team about waking up in the middle of the night thinking the company is making too many masks, then the next night waking up thinking it's not making enough masks.

"Every day is a different obstacle to face or a different hill to climb," he said. "We're on a different playing field that none of us have been in before."



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But Roach said he wouldn't want to be anywhere else during this crisis.

"We've seen the entire U.S. industry build this so quickly and competitors work with competitors and people we didn't even know existed are assisting others, including us, on how to get things done and try to help flatten the curve," he said. "There are a lot of 15 hour days, but in many ways it's been pretty fun to see and be a part of."

"One thing we've proven in the U.S. is we can move quickly," he continued. "Everyone in this supply chain has an expertise that is funneling into each of these companies. Going forward, given a timeframe and commitment (from the government), we'll all perform."

## HanesBrands

Drilling down, each speaker offered more information on his respective company's involvement in the PPE realm. Holloway said collaborating with members of the coalition to navigate through the massive need for this equipment has been time-consuming but productive. Hanes and partners have been working directly with the federal government through Health and Human Service (HHS) on creating a three-ply mask that is based on Hanes' cotton jersey fabric and is treated with an antimicrobial finish, he said. It is designed to be a basic face covering, not surgical in nature or N95, he added.

"Right now, we're cranking out 1.5 million to 2 million masks per week for the general population and healthcare workers," Holloway said.

"The other thing we're working on is an improvement to those masks in a couple of different ways," he added. "One, in trying to get closer to more of a surgical mask, we're working with N.C. State and its Nonwovens Institute to create a multi-ply mask construction that would be the equivalent of a surgical mask and working toward developing something beyond that. It's evolving minute by minute, it seems."

For Hanes, one of the stress points has been learning more about test methods and requirements for various types of PPE, Holloway said.

The company also has been "toying" with medical gowns for healthcare providers through HHS, Holloway said.

"We're all trying to band together to collaborate," he said. We're working with material suppliers and other vendors, both domestically and abroad, to try to meet the needs of our population dealing with the pandemic. I've been very overwhelmed in terms of the positivity and collaboration between all of these resources. Everyone seems to be working together and sharing information and being very, very transparent about what they can and can't do. It's been a very stressful but a very positive experience thus far.

"The collaboration and the general transparency between competitors and normal relationships you have in the supply chain has been huge," he added. "We have been able to move things along quickly. And this experience makes you start thinking about what you can do with what you already have. We figured that out right off the bat. We make a ton of this fabric. We have the capacity to crank stuff out quickly, so now we should start thinking in terms of how we can utilize our resources as far as raw



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materials and cut and sew and design thinking to impact something in scale. And that can be done with any product."

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