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Caution greets new textile pact
Accord draws praise; concerns still remain

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Will it work?

That's the question on the minds of textile and apparel workers and companies after the signing of a comprehensive agreement to limit U.S. imports of Chinese textile and apparel goods.

"I hope this will help save my job," said Lewis Simpson. "We need to do something or we won't have any textile jobs before long. I don't know whether this is the answer, but something has to be done."

U.S. Rep. Bob Inglis, R-Greenville, said, "This three-year agreement is good for Upstate textile jobs and the industry as a whole."

Advertisement Auggie Tantillo, executive director of the American Manufacturing Trade Action Coalition, said, "U.S. textile and apparel manufacturing workers and their communities are big winners today."

U.S. Sen. Jim DeMint, R-S.C., agreed that the agreement is "good news for U.S. textile producers and for American consumers."

Under the agreement, China would not be able to flood the U.S. market over the next three years.

Imports of clothing and textile products from China to the United States jumped by about 50 percent in the first eight months of the year to nearly \$17.7 billion. A global quota system ended on Jan. 1. Through the first eight months of the year, China held 33 percent of the U.S. import market share by volume, the highest share held by a single country in modern U.S. history. In the first eight months of last year, China held a 24.5 percent market share.

Many industry officials said they have not yet seen the agreement and don't know for sure exactly what it means for their work force.

"The devil is in the details" of the agreement, said Richard Dillard, spokesman for Spartanburg-based Milliken & Co.

The textile-apparel industry has lost roughly 400,000 jobs since 2001, he said, many of them in the past year since quotas came off the goods imported.

Still, the industry has 650,000 jobs left.

"We will fight to preserve these jobs," he said. "All indications are this agreement will help in some manner to accomplish that."

Rick Henderson, president of Belton-based Rice Mills, said he hasn't seen the agreement but expects that it will help protect textile jobs more than apparel jobs like those at his plant.

Part of his solution is to develop fabric in China for use in his apparel plant. That decision "has hurt as far as jobs go," he said, but his customers demand it. The agreement probably will "make the goods more expensive," he said.

If the expense becomes high enough, production and jobs might move back to the United States, he said.

"That would be the ideal," he said.

Another idea Rice Mills is trying, he said, is to go directly to its customers through a new Web site.

Henderson's theory is that the industry and its companies must protect themselves because the government "has just kind of given up on this industry."

Curtis Simon, associate professor of economics at Clemson University, said people need to understand that trade is not the only issue facing the textile-apparel industry and its jobs. Technology changes over the years also have had an impact on the number of jobs available.

Whether the United States can protect every job, textile or otherwise, is not the right question, he said.

"The right question is how we adapt to changes in a work we know is changing," Simon said.

This country generally has made a decision that it will not try to protect every single job, unlike the decision made by Europe.

"We have an economy that has its problems," he said, "but by and large, it knows how to adapt."

Government and other organizations work to buffer workers who can't adapt to the changes in the economy with retraining for different careers, attracting new companies that create new jobs and by limited training for similar employment to what they lost.

But the key is to prepare people from the outset to deal with change.

But Dillard said the textile-apparel industry will do what it can to protect its jobs by studying the agreement in detail to figure out exactly what is protected and how.

"I think now we'll face the significant challenge of enforcing the agreement to make sure it is not undermined," Dillard said.

The agreement also helps China by putting more certainty into the market. Garment deals at China's biggest trade fair earlier this month dropped by about 10 percent from the previous fair, with sales to the United States falling by 44 percent given the uncertainties over trade disputes between China and the United States and Europe, according to The Associated Press.
