***Journey to PFC-Free***

**INTRO**

Imagine if I told you that a packaging company was using a chemical that pollutes the Earth and was found in penguins and seal cubs in Antarctica and polar bears in the Arctic Circle. Likely, it wouldn’t come as that much of a shock and is almost expected. These brands don’t often preach about protecting the environment and sustainability. However, when the same scenario is applied to outdoor companies it immediately seems less likely.

Greenwashing is considered a claim to deceive consumers into believing that a company’s products are environmentally friendly. One of the industries where green washing is most apparent is the outdoor industry. Often outdoor brands boast about how sustainable and eco-friendly they are, but far too often these claims are unsubstantiated. Outdoor brands use the idea of pristine nature to sell their products but often times they are contributing to the problem of destroying it while still giving the appearance of being green.

When it comes to greenwashing, one of the biggest things the outdoor industry attempts to ignore are PFCs. According to the CDC, “perfluorochemicals (PFCs) are a group of chemicals used to make fluoropolymer coatings that resist heat, oil, stains, grease, and water.”[1](https://www.cdc.gov/biomonitoring/pdf/pfcs_factsheet.pdf)

Outdoor brands use PFCs because of their durability and resistance to oil and water. PFCs are a concern because they don’t break down in the environment, can travel vast distances and can be found in rivers and lakes and animals. In 2015, Greenpeace found traces of PFCs in snow and water samples in some of the most remote locations, from the High Tatras in Slovakia, the Apennines in Italy, and the Swiss Alps[2](https://search-proquest-com.colorado.idm.oclc.org/docview/2272756713?pq-origsite=summon). In addition, from studies done on laboratory animals, it is believed that PFCs may affect growth and development, reproduction, and injure the liver of both animals and humans.

Many brands have promised to get rid of PFCs like clothing manufacturers Adidas and H&M. However, outdoor companies are slow to do the same and are hesitant to say it’s possible and Patagonia claims that the PFC-free alternatives are not near as effective at resisting water and oil. Knowing the impact that PFCs had on the environment, it didn’t sit right with the decision makers at Fjällräven that their products contained PFCs.

**FJÄLLRÄVEN’S JOURNEY TO PFC FREE**

Nathan Dopp is the current CEO of Fjallraven for the Americas. He has been at Fjällräven since October of 2012 working as Vice President of Sales and Marketing for North America until a promotion in March of 2016 to his current role. In addition, Nathan serves as a board member for “Leave No Trace Center for Outdoor Ethics”. Growing up, I’ve seen his passion for his work and the outdoors first-hand. Nathan Dopp believes, “PFCs served a purpose, in that they’re highly effective at repelling water, etc. but it’s pretty apparent that they’re not sustainable and they’re bad for the environment. We are a brand that are always looking for ways to be more sustainable and be better.”

Obviously, Fjällräven’s goal to remove PFCs was a daunting task. PFC’s were the best tool to impregnate textiles to make them water and oil repellent and there aren’t many effective alternatives that meet Fjällräven’s environmental standards. They were tasked with something many other brands said was impossible. “With all change there’s the easy solution and then there’s the right thing to do, so we’re kind of on the camp of it’s the right thing to do”, said Nathan Dopp.

Christiane Dolva is Head of Sustainability at Fjällräven, and this means that she is involved in a lot of business decisions to ensure the brand considers and prioritizes sustainable solutions, materials and processes. Christiane Dolva said, “in a way it was easier for us than for other brands to start looking for alternatives, as we didn’t already have a large collection of shell garments at the time. We were able to get it right from the beginning.”[3](https://foxtrail.fjallraven.com/articles/the-on-going-quest-for-100-pfc-free-eco-shell/)

Despite having the advantage of essentially starting at the beginning it was not easy. The options were few and far between and they still had to assess the potential side effects of other chemicals that they may use in their new impregnation process. They examined a range of durable water repellants but when it came to the final decision for the product, they had to makes some compromises. They had found a solution that had an acceptable water repellency; however, it was less durable and oil resistant than other durable water repellants. Dolva said, “We asked ourselves, ‘Does a jacket really need to be oil repellent if it is better for the environment?”[4](https://foxtrail.fjallraven.com/articles/the-on-going-quest-for-100-pfc-free-eco-shell/).

However, the challenge of finding their alternative PFC-free durable water repellant (DWR) wasn’t over. Fjällräven still had to ensure the DWR supplier could work with the materials supplier and that the material of choice works with the DWR. According to Fjällräven chemical specialist Felix Aejmelaues-Linström, “There are so many people involved and so many confidential details… It’s like playing chess, because it’s a slow process of moving forwards and backwards all the time.”[5](https://foxtrail.fjallraven.com/articles/the-on-going-quest-for-100-pfc-free-eco-shell/)

In addition to having to deal with the chess match of supplier relations, Fjällräven was forced to make another compromise. As of right now, there are currently no water-repellant PFC-free zips for Fjällräven to use. After testing the zips, the fact that they were PFC free didn’t matter anymore. None of them were water-resistant. Fjällräven had to compromise and use PFC impregnated zips or zippers on their products, as Dolva explains, “we want to convince other big suppliers to change their minds about zips, but we’re not quite there yet.”[6](https://foxtrail.fjallraven.com/articles/the-on-going-quest-for-100-pfc-free-eco-shell/)

After lots of hard work developing a new DWR and pivoting away from PFC impregnation Fjällräven reached their goal in 2015. Fjällräven had successfully removed PFC impregnation amongst its product line.

**JOURNEY TO PUBLIC ACCEPTANCE**

Clearly, Fjällräven has done a good thing by moving away from PFC-free impregnation. However, they are still facing their biggest obstacle yet: public acceptance. Fjällräven has received numerous rewards for their sustainability efforts and the general public recognizes and commends Fjällräven’s efforts of being more sustainable and eco-friendlier. Despite this, many consumers don’t believe the new DWR is as effective, don’t understand the philosophy of care for the products, and can’t rationalize the price point.

When it pertains to water repellency Fjällräven’s final product works just as well as PFCs water repellant, however, it does not have the same water-beading effect of PFC products and is missing the long-lasting durability of PFCs. Due to the product not having the typical beading effect, it has led to slow public acceptance of the new product. Nathan Dopp said, “The PFC stuff works great you know what you get out there, and you get a droplet and the droplet forms and runs off your coat. That’s awesome right? But with our product, it’s not quite as apparent”. This leads to the consumer thinking that the product isn’t working when in fact it is doing its job. However, over time you’ll notice that the water may begin to soak into the product this is because the DWR is not as durable and will slowly wear off with use and washing.

PFCs are very durable, and unfortunately Fjällräven’s PFC-free DWR isn’t quite as durable. This is both a positive and a negative: Fjällräven’s PFC-free DWR will break down naturally in the environment and is eco-friendly and sustainable, but they can wash away over time and will slowly become less effective. Meanwhile, PFCs don’t break down in nature, however, this means that PFCs make very durable water repellants and they remain on your jacket forever. To combat the lack of durability Fjällräven wants the consumer to know how to take care of their products effectively. They provide products such as wax to provide an external layer of coating on their products that help their products remain durable. However, the idea of needing to take care of the product hasn’t fully been accepted by the general audience.

In addition, Fjällräven products are at a high price point and many consumers can’t rationalize the price point. Fjallraven’s products are more expensive because they are eco-friendly, sustainable, and made from quality fabrics. Their process is more expensive as they are doing everything as ethically as they can. As Nathan Dopp states it, “Our consumers should believe in what we do and are already kind of in that camp, so they don’t mind spending a little extra money for things that are on the right side of these issues.”

**WHAT OTHER OUTDOOR BRANDS CAN LEARN FROM FJÄLLRÄVEN**

Fjällräven accomplished something massive. Something that many major outdoor brands said was impossible by removing PFCs across their products. Nathan Dopp explained, “We don’t like to throw stones at anybody else but it’s one of those things where if we can do it, and we’re a sizable company then everyone else can’t really say it’s not possible.” Nathan continues on by saying, “You get a lot of big brands, just saying ‘oh it’s not possible’ or ‘it’s just not economically viable’. It isn’t really that you can’t do it, you just have to make the choice”

When brands examine Fjällräven’s journey of PFC free impregnation across their products, it should serve as inspiration for brands in corporate social responsibility. It is proof that when something is the wrong, and it seems impossible to fix, all it takes is some hard work and people who believe in what they are doing. In 2012 PFC free impregnation seemed like a pipe dream however by 2015 Fjallraven had done it across their entire product line. They believed that damage PFCs caused to the environment far outweighed its capabilities as a durable water repellant. Fjallraven knew it would be tough, but they were relentless in their efforts until they found a suitable product.

Other brands have followed suit, for example, Jack Wolfskin has been 100% PFC free since the spring of 2019. They have developed a similar DWR to Fjällräven and face many of the same obstacles as they do such as not having oil-repellency. Even, Patagonia has released some PFC free products and has plans to go 100% PFC free by 2022. Fjallraven’s corporate team in Sweden had this to say, “We believe that ongoing government regulations around PFC’s and public sentiment will lead to the creation of better alternatives and desire to switch will lead to PFCs being used less and less, but because PFCs are effective an inexpensive this may take a long time.”

**Links to Quotes:**

1-<https://www.cdc.gov/biomonitoring/pdf/pfcs_factsheet.pdf>

2-<https://search-proquest-com.colorado.idm.oclc.org/docview/2272756713?pq-origsite=summon>

3- <https://foxtrail.fjallraven.com/articles/the-on-going-quest-for-100-pfc-free-eco-shell/>

4-<https://foxtrail.fjallraven.com/articles/the-on-going-quest-for-100-pfc-free-eco-shell/>

5-<https://foxtrail.fjallraven.com/articles/the-on-going-quest-for-100-pfc-free-eco-shell/>

6- <https://foxtrail.fjallraven.com/articles/the-on-going-quest-for-100-pfc-free-eco-shell/>