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Local staple expands inventory of natural fibers

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For the Journal*

During the past few years, more muted tones of natural fibers have begun to dot the shelves of Herrschner's among the rainbow assortment of neon yarns.

Herrschner's, a Stevens Point staple for more than 100 years, currently carries several eco-friendly varieties of yarns made from natural fibers including wool, alpaca, soy, bamboo and organic cotton.

Ted Hesemann, president and CEO of Herrschner's, said that recently the company's suppliers have expanded their inventories to include more varieties of these natural products.

As its suppliers have added natural fibers, so has Herrschner's, he said. Though the selection of acrylic yarns available on the market far outnumbers natural fiber yarns, he added.

Acrylic yarns are manufactured from petroleum-based chemicals and although the cost of acrylic is rising as oil prices go up, these man-made products are still cheaper than the more eco-friendly natural fibers on the market.

Natural products are about \$1 or \$2 more per skein than acrylic- or polyester-based yarns.

Hesemann said acrylic yarns are more popular, in part because natural fibers are more expensive.

From its warehouse, which covers 15 acres off Hoover Road, Herrschner's operates one of the largest mail-order craft businesses in the world.

Hesemann estimated that mail and online orders make up about 98 percent of the company's business. Herrschner's mails more than 13 million catalogs worldwide each year.

Hesemann said the company has considered making the switch to recycled paper for its catalogs but the price of recycled paper is too high to make the option financially viable.

"We look into it constantly, because we would prefer to do that, but it's not economical," he said.

Hesemann said the company uses lightweight shipping materials and recycles other materials like foam packing peanuts whenever possible.

After consulting with a power company, Hesemann said the company also plans to replace the lighting in its warehouse with a more energy efficient system and is also considering upgrading the computer and air-conditioning systems to models that use less power to save costs.