

Unbiased global packaging intelligence and analysis

COIR FIBER HAS THE PACKAGING INDUSTRY GOING 'COCONUTS' FOR RENEWABLE MATERIALS

In a struggle to find innovative solutions that satisfy product manufacturers' and consumers' desire for sustainability, packaging designers are taking their lead from the automotive industry and its use of natural renewable resources.

Ford Motor Co. is experimenting with soy-based seat foam to eliminate the use of petroleum-based materials, and **Mercedes Benz** has used

coconut fibers in seats. Researchers at **Baylor University** are experimenting with coconut-based trunk liners, floorboards, and car-door interior covers, according to an *MSNBC* report.

These same researchers founded **Whole Tree, Inc.**, a sustainable materials company that has teamed up with packaging design and testing company **Compadre** to develop inner packing solutions made in part of coconut fiber.

Prototype transit testing is currently underway to evaluate how well the inner packs protect the shipping of manufacturing parts, small electronic components, and some heavier items.

"Major companies are contacting Whole Tree to help meet their sustainability objectives," said Blake Mosher, evp of Whole Tree. "We're very pleased to explore how our material can be used in the packing industry."

Coconut fiber, or coir fiber, has a natural resistance to mildew and microbial attack, as well as a natural resistance to burning because it is a lignin-rich natural fiber. Coconut fiber is also strong and stiff, which allows Whole Tree's material to be formed into various shapes for packaging applications.

Whole Tree calls its material coir form. According to Mosher,



A new material made of coconut fiber is being tested as an alternative to corrugated packaging.

Whole Tree processes the raw coconut fiber to its secret specifications and then sends the fiber through a nonwoven manufacturing process. Thermoplastics are combined with the fiber to offer additional binding characteristics. The outcome is a felted-like material that can be manufactured with different weights and variable combinations of properties. This material can then be pressed; and

the pressed form is what Compadre sees as attractive for the packaging industry.

While coir fiber has a higher price point than corrugated material, Compadre ceo Darryl Kelinske pointed out corrugated tends to be a single-use product whereas Compadre is developing multiuse product for its current clients. "The reusability factor makes the coir form a cost effective choice," he said.

Both Whole Tree and Compadre expect companies to choose coconut fiber-based packaging because it is a commercially viable, sustainable solution. "The market is starving for new sustainable products that are not petroleum dependent," said Henry Heil, vp of design and engineering for Compadre. "These companies want innovative packaging for their innovative products. Coir form meets their desire and it's a leap in sustainability."

Packaging Strategies Perspective: *Some companies are becoming dissatisfied with just reusable packaging and want something that will have a greater environmental impact. Natural, renewable resources meet that need if they can keep packaging out of landfills and are totally decomposable. PS*

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