



Outfitting Tomorrow event connects students and industry leaders to discuss a more sustainable outdoor gear industry

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Students showcase their innovative outdoor apparel designs at the Outfitting Tomorrow event.

One of the best things about Colorado? Obviously the countless places to ski, hike, kayak, camp, run and everything in between. But if you're an outdoor enthusiast, chances are you need a pretty big garage and gear closet to store all the stuff you use on your adventures.

The problem? Some of that outdoor gear is manufactured with potentially dangerous PFAs, otherwise known as forever chemicals. And beyond that, at the end of its lifespan, roughly 85% of the things we use and wear to explore the outdoors end up in a landfill.

Colorado State University's new interdisciplinary certificate in Sustainable Outdoor Product Design and Development seeks to solve this problem. It focuses on material innovations, entrepreneurship and health to equip learners with the skills they need to thrive in an evolving world and enter the workforce with industry-ready skills to create sustainable and circular outdoor products.

"We're really trying to give our students an education that they can create and build on to make the world a better place," said Sonali Diddi, an associate professor in CSU's Department of Design and Merchandising.

This also requires partnering with leaders in the outdoor industry. Enter Outfitting Tomorrow, an event sponsored in part by funding from the Colorado State Outdoor Recreation Grant program through the Colorado Outdoor Recreation Industry Office and CSU System Spur funding program.

This networking and innovation summit, which was held on Nov. 1 at the CSU Spur campus in Denver, brought together CSU students and professors, as well as industry professionals who worked to help build a comprehensive education roadmap to the future of the outdoor recreation economy and sustainable product design.

Here are some of the key takeaways from the event.



Outdoor recreation is a huge deal in Colorado – and that requires a huge workforce

Conor Hall, the director of the Colorado Office of Outdoor Recreation, kicked off the event with a glimpse at just how important the outdoors are to Colorado. After growing more than 20% in the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic, the outdoors are now a \$65.8 billion industry in the state.

And that has big implications for a place like CSU that is educating the next generation of leaders.

“For such a big industry, we need a successful, talented, educated and diverse workforce, and part of that comes down to raising awareness around the opportunities and careers in this industry for young people,” Hall said. “I think there needs to be a paradigm shift ... that there are real, good-paying jobs and real careers that can be made in this industry.”

Companies want to be more sustainable

Given that they've been found in everything from the water supply to human placentas, PFAS are hardly a unique problem for the outdoor industry. Outdoor brands can be at the forefront of removing these chemicals from their supply chain. Instead, it's become a matter of beginning to define what these products are helping consumers make smart choices about what they should and shouldn't buy impacts the environment.

During the panel, "Toward a Circular Future: Outdoor Product Innovation with Sustainable Materials and PFAS Alternatives," industry leaders pointed to the outdoor retailer REI as a positive example in removing forever chemicals from its products.

"The companies that are going to survive best are going to be the ones who say 'we need to start changing' and be better," said panelist Doug Kobold, the executive director of the California Product Stewardship Council.

A more sustainable industry starts in college

Ryan Perry, who graduated from CSU in 2022 and now works as a product designer at the ski apparel company Obermeyer, said learning about the importance of durability in college has carried him through into his professional career.

"Learning about materials in school is super valuable, as well as recycled materials and sustainability," he said. "There's a good translation from what I learned in school to what I'm doing now – it's almost identical."

Perry was part of Outfitting Tomorrow's panel called "Reskilling for Circularity: Preparing Climate-Smart Outdoor Businesses." He and other outdoor industry leaders discussed how product designers like him are working to create gear that hopefully will be part of the 15% that doesn't end its life in the landfill.

He emphasized that knowing how to make the industry more sustainable comes from a deep understanding of products and what goes into materials.

"It's about having the passion to push your company to work to do the right thing and also really knowing how to do it in a practical sense," he said.

[The Department of Design and Merchandising](#) is part of CSU's [College of Health and Human Sciences](#).