



**T**HE CITIZENS HAD long sensed that dirty clothes were unhealthy. An awareness of unsightly, smelly clothes in some sections of the country helped put the issue on the National Agenda, and hygienists warned Congress that dirt could be toxic. In 1970 the Clean Clothes Act was passed unanimously. It established New Clothes Hygiene Standards (NCHS). These mandated, with admirable specificity, that all *new* clothes have less than 1.2 pounds of dirt per million square yards of cloth. The 1970 act also established National Hygiene Quality Standards (NHQS). They identified "safe" levels of dirt and required states to prepare state implementation plans (SIPs) to clean up *old* clothes in areas that did not meet these standards (non-attainment areas). The Hygiene Protection Administration (HPA) drew up the needed rules.

People's reactions were fairly predictable. Some washed their clothes more often and turned to cleaner activities. Others who were just getting ready to buy new wardrobes found clothes much more expensive because they had to be made from dirt-resistant fabrics. Clothes producers in the East were hard hit—since they relied mostly on fabrics that were not dirt-resistant. Western states became major suppliers of new clothes.

The hygienists were not pleased with the results. They knew that *The author is associate professor of economics, University of Florida.*

cleaner people would be healthier, happier people, but for some reason clothes seemed about as dirty as ever. Members of Congress were disturbed by grumblings among voters: those who had to buy expensive clothes were unhappy, and those who wanted clean clothes felt more could be done.

The National Hygiene Quality Standards resulted in differential burdens for the states. In some states people were fastidious, so their clothes easily met the standards; in others people were very sloppy. The Clean Clothes Act Amendments of 1977 set more stringent National Hygiene Quality Standards, so that clothes washing had to achieve a minimum percentage reduction in dirt (by means of "scrubbing")—no matter that the clothes were dirt-resistant in the first place. This rule imposed very high compliance costs, but it did tip the scales in favor of states producing non-dirt-resistant clothes. The 1977 amendments also made people who lived in states producing non-dirt-resistant clothes buy locally made clothes. Unions in those states persuaded legislators that jobs had to be protected this way. (Consumers were not well represented in those deliberations.)

Other changes in the law further neutralized the West's advantages in producing dirt-resistant clothes. The Prevention of Significant Deterioration (PSD) provision required that areas with pristine clothes remain that way. PSD

meant that multiple washings were necessary, and that new clothes had to be washed with the "best available soap suds" (BASS). The cost of BASS meant that people wore fewer clothes, even in cold weather, so the incidence of colds increased. HPA then proposed a minimum clothing level requirement.

A final evaluation of the clean clothes program has yet to be written. In fact, the complexity of implementing it is only now being recognized. Administrative exemptions to the rules seem to follow neither rhyme nor reason, but their number is rising. Person-by-person regulation has reduced the average level of dirt per square yard of cloth, but clean-up costs are increasing rapidly. Some are even questioning the fairness (if not the wisdom) of the detailed rules. Hygienists have noted that more people are wearing old clothes, which are not subject to New Clothes Hygiene Standards. Of course, any major mending of old clothes raises the question of whether those standards apply, so court cases abound. While the average level of cleanliness has increased since 1970, dirty clothes (as defined in the act) remain a problem in some areas.

Illness is on the rise, special soap costs are soaring, and even the price of dirt-resistant fabrics is up. Congresswoman Yetta Nudder has proposed a bill to complement the Clean Clothes Act, called the Clean Body and Clean Mind Act. We await Washington's next move. ■