

U.S. takes step for clothing quotas

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The Bush administration yesterday agreed to consider new quotas on five categories of Chinese-made clothing, a step toward protecting domestic manufacturers from cheaper imports.

Textile companies and workers last month filed a series of petitions asking the administration to cap imports of Chinese-made pants, shirts, underwear and other products.

The requests come ahead of the Jan. 1 expiration of a global system of quotas that shield domestic companies from foreign competition. The industry is worried that hundreds of thousands of jobs will be lost after the system is lifted at the end of the year under the terms of a World Trade Organization agreement.

The administration yesterday agreed to consider limiting imports of synthetic pants, cotton and synthetic shirts, woven-fabric shirts and underwear. On Friday, it said it would consider capping imports of cotton pants.

Textile companies consider the administration's decision an important victory in their battle to protect domestic companies and jobs, though it is only a procedural step.

Yesterday's decision started a 90-day process. Officials are scheduled to decide whether to limit trade by the end of that period, though they could decide earlier or push back a decision.

U.S. retailers and many in the apparel industry have criticized the latest petitions, calling the process for limiting imports not clear and the textile industry complaints poorly documented.

China has complained that the measures are protectionist and run counter to WTO agreements, though the country agreed to safeguard measures when it joined the organization in 2001.

— *Jeffrey Sparshott*