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The Rupp Report: ITMF Conference 2013, Part 1



Jürg Rupp,
Executive Editor

The 2013 ITMF Annual Conference opened on September 8 in Bregenz, Austria. The overall theme is "Rebalancing the Power between Manufacturing and Retail." After the first day of the conference, it was quite astonishing to see how much the attitude of this inner circle of the classic cotton market has changed.

The New Approach

Years ago at an ITMF conference, it was virtually not allowed to mention the generic name of a man-made fiber such as polyester or polyamide. However, over the last few years, the organizers have even invited speakers from the man-made-fiber world and their fibers and yarns businesses.

For many decades, cotton was a raw material second to none, with a unique market position. In this context, every man-made fiber was considered to be an enemy of cotton. Today - fortunately - the cotton community is watching very carefully the fiber trends around the world, and their respective applications. For an outside observer, it is amazing to see how the cotton industry is looking at itself to hold its undisputed but challenged position in the global fiber market.

The ICAC View

In his remarkable opening speech for the Cotton segment of the conference's Fiber Session, Terry Townsend, Ph.D., soon-to-be-leaving executive director of the International Cotton Advisory Committee (ICAC), gave an overview of the present and past situations in the cotton industry. He mentioned the crucial situation in August 2011, when cotton prices skyrocketed. However, he emphasized that prices today are back to a relatively stable level. Some years ago, the prices among the major competing fibers - such as polyester filament, viscose (rayon) and cotton - began to get closer. Today, he mentioned, cotton prices are sometimes higher than

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viscose prices. On the other hand, the market share of cotton in apparel and home furnishings has dropped from around 75 percent down to some 55 percent.

Among the major concerns for the cotton industry is the ongoing discussion about sustainability. Townsend asked the audience how one should measure and read sustainability. He strongly urged the whole production chain to take this issue very much into consideration. Only if the whole production chain takes care of this ever-more important matter will it be possible to maintain the existing trust and confidence for cotton in the future.

Better Than Its (Current) Image

Fritz Grobien, president of the Bremen Cotton Exchange, talked about "The New Meaning of Sustainability." The Bremen Cotton Exchange organizes one of the most renowned cotton industry gatherings with its biennial International Cotton Conference. Grobien underlined the importance of what Townsend said - that the whole upstream production chain must become active in order to reach the target for the cotton industry. He spoke about the fear of people on Main Street regarding some environmental issues relating to cotton. Probably one of the most important issues today is that of genetically modified products. One may understand that some people hesitate to eat genetically modified food, and today even to wear genetically modified cotton. Some other common concerns in the textile industry from the consumer side are prices, child labor, use of pesticides, water quality, global warming and food additives.

Grobien said that today, more than 29 million hectares of land are used to grow cotton in the Northern Hemisphere. Regarding cotton growing, the farmers have succeeded in the past years to reduce the following:

- land use - 30 percent;
- soil erosion - 68 percent;
- water for irrigation - 75 percent; and
- energy - 36 percent.

Grobien strongly emphasized the fact that the textile chain must deliver what the customer is asking for. As he said, "There is no excuse for the retailers not to know where their goods are coming from." At the end of the day, it is the customer who decides about sustainability, traceability and confidence in a product. Grobien's conclusion was that the industry is responsible for securing production and demand.

It is obvious that the cotton community in all four corners of the world is very much concerned about the image and the future of the industry. The people involved have been talking about this concern for some 10 years so far. At the ITMF conference, it was apparent that the situation is very much in mind, and some minds are really changing.

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