

The Rupp Report

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The Rupp Report: Is There "Better Cotton"? (ITMF Conference Part 4)

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To be green is fashionable. To be sustainable is even more fashionable. In the past few years, new labels that claim to be fair, green, sustainable, and taking care of the farmers mushroomed on the global textile system have blossomed. Today it is impossible to define how many "green" labels are on the market. Using Google to search for news about "green labels" returns 323,000,000 results.



As reported over the past month, the International Textile Manufacturers Federation's (ITMF's) annual conference was held in Beijing, October 16-18, 2014. The motto of the event was "Shared Opportunity, Shared Responsibility." Of course, cotton has a great responsibility with respect to the whole production process from seeding and cultivation to harvesting and storing.

ITMF Congress 2015 In San Francisco

Awareness of the global cotton industry has changed dramatically over the years. At the ITMF conference, different cotton-related organizations present more data and information about the whole cotton process, to show the world that cotton is still a most desired fiber, in spite of all rumors around it.

The global textile industry certainly will see and hear a lot more about these issues at the ITMF conference in 2015, to be held October 4-6 in San Francisco. Looking at the supporting organizations from the United States, the groundwork certainly is there to make this conference a home run for the U.S. cotton industry.

What's The Problem?

Particularly in the Western world, consciousness about the environment has changed dramatically. Many big brands are trying to create a greener image regarding child labor, pesticide use and soil depletion. All the big cotton organizations are trying to tell the world that the message got through and they definitely care about the environment. Also in question is global fiber consumption. Currently, cotton holds some 28-percent share of global fiber consumption, but has lost some ground to man-made fibers. However, this is not the fault of cotton, but rather because of increasing demand for industrial textiles.

Hazardous Pollutants

Cotton is still the most important natural fiber, enjoying great admiration and acceptance around the globe. However, cotton and its trade up to apparel manufacturing, experienced some bad times recently, particularly with the disaster in Bangladesh (See *“The Rupp Report: The Hall Of Shame,”* February 18, 2014, and *“The Rupp Report: Increased Social Consciousness,”* April 15, 2014). Many famous global brands manufacture goods in Bangladesh — among them H&M and Inditex (Zara) — as well as U.S.-based companies Walmart and Gap. Extensive Greenpeace studies in 2011 and 2012 showed more than two-thirds of all branded apparel tested and sold worldwide contains hazardous pollutants, including products made by large fashion manufacturers and retailers including Calvin Klein, Levi’s, Zara and Marks & Spencer. These brands and others that have multi-million dollar budgets do virtually everything to win back customer confidence.

The Jungle Of Green Labels

To prove “green,” countless labels and standards have appeared on the global stage to verify labor conditions, environmental care and waste treatment. It is rather impossible to count all of the labels and standards. One of the most prominent is the Öeko-Tex Standard 100 label. But who is controlling all of the products that flood the global market tagged with this label? And what about cotton, which is still in the spotlight regarding environment damages? Irrigation, pesticides and genetically modified cotton are just a few of the issues surrounding cotton. At the ITMF conference, participants heard about an initiative in the cotton business known as the Better Cotton Initiative (BCI).

Better Cotton Initiative

Patrick Laine is CEO of the Switzerland-based BCI. He gave a presentation at the ITMF annual conference about BCI and the group’s initiatives. BCI’s website reports: “In 2005, a group of visionary organisations came together to figure out what could be done to safeguard the future of cotton. ‘There has to be a better way,’ they said. It turns out there is. It’s called Better Cotton.”

BCI states it is “a not-for-profit organisation stewarding the global standards for Better Cotton, and bringing together cotton’s complex supply chain, from the farmers to the retailers. BCI exists to make global cotton production better for the people who produce it, better for the environment it grows in and better for the sector’s future, by developing Better Cotton as a sustainable mainstream commodity.”

“To achieve this mission, BCI works with a range of stakeholders across the cotton supply chain to promote measurable and continuing improvements for the environment, farming communities and the economies of cotton-producing areas. Our four specific aims:

- Reduce the environmental impact of cotton production
- Improve livelihoods and economic development in cotton producing areas
- Improve commitment to and flow of Better Cotton throughout supply chain
- Ensure the credibility and sustainability of the Better Cotton Initiative.”

A Holistic Approach

The BCI standard system is described as a holistic approach to sustainable cotton production covering environment, social and economic pillars of sustainability. The system claims to be “designed to ensure the exchange of good practices, and to encourage the scaling up of collective action to establish Better Cotton as a sustainable mainstream commodity.”

The Better Cotton Production Principles and Criteria lay out the global definition of Better Cotton, by upholding the following six production principles:

- Farmers who minimize the harmful impact of crop protection practices.
- Farmers who use water efficiently and care for the availability of water.
- Farmers who care for the health of the soil.
- Farmers who conserve natural habitats.
- Farmers who care for and preserve the quality of the fiber.
- Farmers who promote decent work.

By adhering to these principles, BCI farmers produce cotton in a way that is measurably better for the environment and farming communities. “BCI wants to bring together farmers, ginners, traders, spinners, mills, cut and sew, manufacturers, retailers, brands and grassroots organizations in a unique global community committed to developing Better Cotton as a sustainable mainstream commodity.”

Mainstream (?)

It seems BCI is another attempt to generate attention for and to sell a “green” feeling.

“BCI exists to make global cotton production better for the people who produce it, better for the environment it grows in and better for the sector’s future, by developing Better Cotton as a sustainable mainstream commodity.”

“Mainstream?” is the thought The Rupp Report had listening to Laine as he explained his high-flying targets, leaving the audience with many unanswered questions. It was not possible to get a firm answer from Laine about the success of BCI. Another question is who gives the BCI the right to act this way and to call it Better Cotton (Initiative)? Don’t get the Rupp Report wrong, every initiative created to improve the whole textile production chain is more than welcomed. Yet, how is it possible that companies such as H&M, Marks & Spencer and others, manufacture in Bangladesh, are also main members and sponsors of BCI? Well, it seems today it is “mainstream” to be called green.

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