

Proof of sustainability

By Michael O'Rielley, Australian Cotton Shippers Association

Sustainability and traceability are words we've heard a lot in recent years. The need to evidence sustainability claims will continue and the demand for this will only increase within the cotton supply chain. Why? Because consumers are demanding it. They want to know that what they are eating, wearing and using have been produced with minimal or no impact on the environment and that human rights principles have been upheld in delivering food, fibre and other products to market.

Australian cotton growers are among the world's best when it comes to growing and producing sustainable cotton. The Australian cotton supply chain too is among the world's best and we can trace a bale right back to farm and field level. Australia has a reputation globally of being clean and green along with upholding human rights principles so should having a highly regarded reputation be enough to appease the consumers? The short answer is no.

Consumer choice and behavior is the driver of such demands and the uptake of sustainability and traceability programs. The sequence of events starts with the consumer wanting to know where the shirt they are considering purchasing has come from and this flows back to the brandowner, to the manufacturing chain and then right back to the producer of the fibre. In a lot of cases a swing tag on the item of purchase displaying a "sustainability" logo or credentials is enough for the consumer to be satisfied that the product they are purchasing meets best practice credentials and profits from their purchase is going to organisations that uphold environmental and human rights protocols.

Those "sustainability" logos mentioned above might include programs like Better Cotton, myBMP, Cotton Leads, US Cotton Trust Protocol and CmiA (Cotton made in Africa). All these programs are designed to lift the standards of where cotton is grown – to care for the environment, responsible production that does not have a negative impact on local communities, supply chains which include spinning mills and textile manufactures and the brands who market and sell clothing and household products.

Consumer demand for sustainably produced goods – and the traceability credentials that back up these claims – is only going to increase. Making a statement that we adhere to good practices is no longer enough to satisfy consumers, brandowners and the supply chain. We need to prove that adherence and this will come in the form of accreditation to programs like myBMP or Better Cotton. Added to this, we will also need to expand on our traceability practices by providing additional data to the market that demonstrates movement and traceability of cotton from farm to gin, to spinning mill, to knitter or weaver, to garment production and to sale of finished goods.

Essentially, this accreditation will be further entwined with our ability to sell Australian cotton to the world. The requirement to substantiate sustainability claims and full traceability of our supply chain is becoming more common and could well lead to this becoming a "minimum standard" for the trade of our cotton.

For Australian cotton's main competitors Brazil and the US, the majority of their cotton is accredited and those markets are leading the way. Australian cotton should not be left behind. If you aren't already Level 2 myBMP accredited, I encourage you to get on board and future-proof Australian cotton.

Ends