

With many observers predicting constraints in the supply of cotton next year, we ask a group of prominent yarn producers for their reaction.

Clever ideas beyond cotton

If it's true that a move among farmers in the US to plant less cotton (see separate article in this issue of WSA) could lead to a price-increase and even a shortage of the fibre in the months ahead, it stands to reason that fabric and apparel manufacturers may have to look around for alternatives.

The rise of 'new' natural fibres—none of which are really new, of course—from coconut, hemp, bamboo, seaweed, banana and so on is still making only a small impression on the apparel industry, if figures compiled by Invista are to be believed.

The fibre manufacturer's vice-president for technology, Dr Robert Kirkwood, revealed recently that, while polyester accounts for 46% of the material that goes into the world's clothes, and cotton for 38%, no other fibre, including wool and elastane, can claim more than 3% of the market at the moment. This leaves plenty of room for the companies involved in yarn innovation to move forward with new ideas.

Cost of competition

At Pozzi Electa, the price and availability of cotton are important, but not all-important. For many years, the Milan-based yarn producer has been blending different fibres to create products that it believes add real value. "We need to find alternatives to cotton," explains Angelo Pozzi, managing director of the family firm, "because in Italy we cannot compete on cost with cotton producers in other countries."

Many of the blends his company has come up with—there are 60 in all—do contain cotton; some of the yarns it spins are as much as 85% cotton. However, Mr Pozzi is convinced that his company's strength is in combining cotton with other fibres.

He particularly likes the blends that have "high-value" additions to the base-yarn, including cashmere. "We work hand in hand with our customers, of course," he continues. "It's important to do what the market asks. We can propose all 60 of our blends, but we only spin what the customer asks for."

Cellulose-based yarns such as Tencel could become more popular if cotton is in short supply.

Lenzing



Following market trends is tricky. Tearfil prefers to produce yarns that it believes can lead the way.

Tearfil

If he had to pick out one product that he feels brands will be even more interested in during 2008—if sourcing cotton becomes more difficult or more expensive—he says it would have to be his cotton-cashmere blend.

At Catalan yarn producer Antex, Mireia Bernadàs, a member of the management team, also believes a squeeze on cotton will certainly not be bad news, and may well be good news, for her company.

In the apparel sector, the company uses polyester in warp and weft for brands to produce their finished garments. Ms Bernadàs explains that her company's ability to produce polyester yarns that have "the touch of cotton" could put it in a strong position if brands start to seek alternatives.

Antex has already attracted the attention of the sportswear sector. It has produced special panels for moisture management applications and Ms Bernadàs says fashion brands are looking closely at this too because they increasingly want to bring this kind of property to their products.

Its commitment, like Pozzi's, is to make the yarns that fit apparel manufacturers' particular needs. Ms Bernadàs says: "The possibilities are incredible."

Creative influence

Someone who is more forceful about the situation regarding cotton is João Silva, international sales manager at Portuguese yarn producer Tearfil. "I don't think it will affect us," he says. "We shifted our focus away from cotton many years ago."

Of the yarns in his company's collection, only 15% or 20% have any cotton in them and Tearfil now is more focused on cellulose, which Mr Silva says has allowed the company to become "much more creative".

It is spinning a wide range of yarns from Tencel. This includes blends of this fibre with cotton, as well as others that are 100% Tencel. Tearfil also spins viscose—mixes of different kinds of viscose, plus a blend with polyester.

He agrees with Mr Pozzi, that it's hard for anyone in Europe to compete on price and that innovation is the only way forward. "There's some really good stuff coming out of Asia," he says, "so we have to keep developing. That's the only way open to European spinners now. We have to search for new fibres, new blends."

Innovation for Tearfil has also come in the shape of a new spinning technique called 'pluma' (which means feather). Mr Silva explains that the aim of pluma is to control pilling in Tencel. "We've lost business because of pilling in the past," he adds, "but we launched the new spinning system at the start of 2007 and garments produced as a result are already in the shops. Now we're enlarging the capacity of pluma; the real kick-off is here."

With regard to meeting the needs of the market, he makes the point that too many developments from too many different companies are taking place at once for it to be easy for any yarn producer to keep up with the trends. His belief is that it makes more sense to try to lead.

"Designers and product managers are confused about what's going on," he says. "So we have to rely on products that speak for themselves."

A wide range of alternative yarns is available to brands that find their supply of cotton becoming scarce or too expensive.

Tearfil



Five times the price

Viscose has also made an important impact on product development at Condamin-Prodon. The French yarn manufacturer concentrates mostly on synthetic materials and is not fazed by the prospect of problems in the cotton supply chain.

"There will be a lack of cotton for sure," insists the company's Charles-Henri Brossette, "but we are mostly specialised in synthetic yarns so we are not worried about it."

He confirms that it is possible to produce synthetic yarn that will weave into fabric with much of the touch and drape of cotton, but that the material would cost five times more. "We have a lot of contact with the brands, and they are not coming to us to find alternatives that look and feel like cotton. Nobody will pay the price for that. They will just buy cotton instead."

What this contact with brands has revealed is that the focus on sustainability will continue into next year. Mr Brossette is in the camp that argues that less cotton will be good for the textile production industry's overall environmental performance. "We've just finished a huge study into this and cotton came out of it badly, because of the huge quantity of water it can take to produce it," he explains.

Not everyone signs up to that view, but it is, perhaps, beginning to make an impression on some brands. Micro modal is going to be a popular alternative choice in 2008, Mr Brossette predicts. He says his company is already seeing an increase in demand for this material, which he describes as "easier and more ecological to produce" and "available everywhere".

Next year, he is sure this yarn's popularity will grow even more, proving that potential problems with cotton need not hamper development in materials innovation. Invista's Dr Kirkwood may be right to highlight the small share of the market that alternative fibres command at the moment, but the textile industry moves more quickly than ever now. The picture can change.