SUSTAINABILITY: OEKO-TEX

The formal introduction of a new audit and certification programme called Sustainable Textile Production (STeP) will take place in Hong Kong at the end of March 2013. Oeko-Tex believes introducing an independent, transparent, global programme will help manufacturing companies in all parts of the textile supply chain become more sustainable and better at what they do.

Oeko-Tex to replace Standard 1000 with new certification system

Zurich-based international environmental standards association Oeko-Tex has announced that it is developing a new, independent certification system for environmentally friendly and socially responsible companies in the textile and clothing supply chain.

According to a statement from Oeko-Tex, the objective is to provide globally operating textile brands, retail companies and manufacturers along the textile value chain with "trustworthy and transparent documentation of their sustainable production conditions". The new certification system with the name 'Sustainable Textile Production (STeP) by Oeko-Tex' will replace the current Oeko-Tex Standard 1000. Oeko-Tex Standard 100 will remain in place.

Plants and products

The difference between these two standards is clear. Standard 1000 was an auditing and certification system for production plants, focusing on sustainable production processes and socially responsible working conditions, whereas Standard 100 is a product-related certification system for textile articles (from all stages of production) that undergo testing to make sure they are free from harmful substances.



STeP certification will cover all relevant company areas, including health and safety, quality management, use of chemicals, and social responsibility.

Oeko-Tex Association

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Independent, transparent and global. Oeko-Tex says the STeP certification programme is open to companies throughout the textile industry.

Oeko-Tex Association

STeP will be presented to the public for the first time at the Prime Source Forum event in Hong Kong on March 26. A follow-up event to present the new certification system in Europe will take place on June 12 at the Techtextil-Texprocess exhibition in Frankfurt.

Secretary general, Dr Jean-Pierre Haug, has said STeP certification will include analysis of "all relevant company areas", including quality management, use of chemicals, environmental protection, environmental management, social responsibility and health and safety.

Step forward

When *WSA* caught up with Oeko-Tex product manager, David Pircher, to ask about STeP, he said his organisation anticipates that companies will apply for certification of their own volition, at least in some cases. In others, it could be that customers, big retail groups for example, will persuade them to submit themselves to Oeko-Tex for certification. "I expect that the applications will come from both sides," he says, "from those who voluntarily seek certification, but also from suppliers that are explicitly asked by their customers to certify their production sites. Once producing companies see and acknowledge the advantages of STeP certification, this is going to be reflected in the market." Companies will have to pay a licence fee, plus the costs resulting from the analysis of the assessments, and the expenses for the on-site audits. Details of the amounts involved have yet to emerge.

His conviction is that brands and retailers are happy with certification systems because they provide "control with respect to sustainable production", and that STeP will be no exception. Doing the right thing and being seen to be doing the right thing is an issue that is becoming increasingly important in a supply chain that remains global and remains complex but in which, it seems, nothing now can be hidden. And if it's true that we live in a world in which nothing can be hidden (at least not for long), the only way to prosper is to make sure you have nothing to hide.

Unannounced arrival

On the question of the form the audits will take, Mr Pircher's first point is that STeP monitoring will include announced and unannounced audits at manufacturers' premises. The way the audits themselves will progress will depend on two things: the score the company achieves in an initial assessment and its rating against a series of what Oeko-Tex refers to as "trust parameters". Again, details in advance of the formal introduction in Hong Kong are scant but the product manager says communication on both aspects will be clear and extensive when Oeko-Tex comes to publish the STeP standard, which it intends to do in May or June this year. These factors will also have an influence on how long each audit lasts.

In explaining who the auditors will be, Mr Pircher points first to the fact that Oeko-Tex is an association, a collective body, comprising 15 member institutes in all, which together have formal representation in 60 countries around the world. It is these 15 member institutes that will supply auditors for the STeP programme. "This will guarantee a high level of consistency across the globe on assessments as well as audits," David Pircher says.

Path to improvement

Why, in his opinion, will the new set-up be an improvement? "Besides our traditional value, this will offer companies an independent standard, available worldwide, with full transparency of what the requirement is for certification," he concludes, "and one that is specially aligned to the needs of the textile and clothing industry. This system is open to everyone in the industry."

There will be clear and firmly defined criteria. For companies taking part, STeP will offer a competitive advantage through improved image and credibility in the marketplace, he adds, but also by offering them cost-savings because their production processes will become more efficient. They will use their resources better and generate less waste. They will become better at what they do.

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