The trend can be traced back to New Zealand brand Icebreaker or to Swiss Wool, a label created by Lavalan. Now, the move to use locally-sourced wool is expanding to new pastures.

Home grown wool

Jeremy Moon, the founder of Icebreaker, is said to have been inspired to launch his company by a chance meeting with a merino wool farmer in New Zealand. When it introduced the Baacode in 2010, this was one of the first examples of a company tracing its materials back to the farm. Though this experiment in transparency did not last long, it helped build the brand's image by drawing attention to its use of natural materials to make active sports clothing.

In its 2017 Transparency Report, the first of its kind at Icebreaker, the company again gave prominence to the long-term contracts it has established with merino wool growers. Today, it works with 75 contracted merino stations in New Zealand, managed in partnership with The New Zealand Merino Company (NZM). "Home-grown" wool continues to dominate Icebreaker's offering, making up 84% of its total contracted wool supply. The remainder comes from stations in Australia (11%) and South Africa (5%) that meet its quality and ethical specifications, the brand's Transparency Report states.

When Lavalan, a division of German wool specialist Baur Vliestoffe, first launched Swiss Wool thermal insulations in 2011, it not only opened up a new market to Swiss farmers, but also created the very first fillers made in wool (with 12% PLA fibre for durability). The company continues to source its natural raw material from European farms in the Swiss and Austrian alps, but it has also widened its sweep by offering natural thermal insulations made from Swedish or Norwegian wools.

Scandinavian brands "wanted to source their wool locally to differentiate their product offering," says Lavalan's innovation and R&D manager Matthias Böhme, citing Norwegian brands Amundsen and Greater Than A (>A), as its clients. This is possible as "Norway has a



The Lavalan team recently travelled to Norway to produce a film on the supply chain it is setting up in the country. It will be used to promote its new Norwegian Wool label.

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large population of sheep, some 4.5 million head producing four million tonnes of wool yearly," he says.

White sheep

Norwegian wool is quite special, says Peter Krommer, the company's sales and marketing manager, "Norwegian white sheep produce very consistent fibres in terms of length, fineness and crimp which enable us to make nonwovens that are both very durable and very soft." Their environment is also special, he adds, "in summer, the sheep graze in pastures located above the tree line. As the snow melts throughout the spring and summer seasons, they move up in altitude, feeding on fresh grass until late August. And, as Norwegian winters are very cold, they suffer less from diseases and do not usually need a lot of antibiotics compared to animals grown in other countries."

Sheep can live in almost any climate, all around the world, as long as they can graze, says Genady Fedotov, global business manager of HDWool, another wool specialist with a long heritage (Baur Vliestoffe was founded in 1913 and HDWool, based in Bradford, UK, in 1888). This is what gives the natural fibre its ability to adapt to the environment. "In lower temperatures it will insulate better, and it will not be uncomfortable if the temperatures rises," he says.

Most of the company's products are made from wool sourced in Britain, with the exception of merino. "Merino wool is finer and can trap more air, but it has less loft. British wool has more resilience and is therefore more suited to nonwoven thermal insulation applications," Mr Fedotov says. "The average British farm is small as opposed to those in other wool growing countries. We can also make a product from the wool of a specific breed of sheep if a brand requests this, something that Japanese designers like to do," he adds. British brands Howies and Finisterre are among the company's clients.



New Zealand brand Icebreaker continues to source most of its merino wool from New Zealand, which currently makes up 84% of its total contracted supply.

Icebreaker

Local flock

Australian brand Country Road has been using wool for many years, but has recently launched a collection made specifically in locally

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Australian Wool Innovation and its marketing arm The Woolmark Company have been promoting Australian-grown wool, including merino, shown here, for decades in various forms. The original International Wool Secretariat was founded in 1937

The Woolmark Company

sourced merino wool coming from 25 farms in the country. It was created in response to an evolution in consumer demand to know where a product is made and where its raw materials or ingredients come from. At German wool spinner Südwolle, one of Country Road's suppliers, sales manager Verena Keller sees buying local wools as part of a company's traceability and transparency strategies, and it is gaining ground.

Country Road's "commitment to the Australian wool industry — starting with the woolgrowers right through to the end consumer — has evolved into something which is vital in the work we do," says Australian Wool Innovation CEO Stuart McCullough. Woolmark, a part of the organisation, promotes Australian grown wool to designers all over the world. Hiromichi Ochiai, designer of Japanese brand Facetasm, is its current ambassador for a two-season partnership (A/W 18-19 and S/S19).

In the United States, the move to buy local is inspiring large and small brands alike, and concerns not only sheep wools but also bison wool. The North Face's Cali Wool Beanie was one of the products featured in the Green Room Voice space at the Outdoor Show in Friedrichshafen this June. The beanie is made in Rambouillet wool supplied by Bare Ranch, in California. The farm is a part of a Climate Beneficial Wool programme created by Fibershed, based in San Geromino, California. Not only is the wool traced directly to a specific grower, but it is also engaged in a pilot project (funded in part by the VF Corp-owned company) to capture and store carbon dioxide. Bare Ranch says it can sequester 4,068 metric tonnes of carbon dioxide annually with one patch of land and a flock of sheep. This is proof, for The North Face, "that a hyper local climate conscious approach to textile manufacturing can reshape our relationship with the only planet we have."

In addition to the material's recognised performance and environmental attributes (odour resistance, thermoregulation, breathability and biodegradability) and its long-standing use in clothing, it also has the makings of a great story, offering brands an opportunity to show beautiful natural landscapes dotted with endearing animals. "Consumers increasingly want to know where a product comes from; our locally sourced wools add another dimension to the product's authenticity," says Matthias Böhme at Lavalan. For Genady Fedotov, at HDWool, this trend also helps to revive forgotten British breeds and the special wools they make. All in all, homegrown wools can be spun into many inspiring stories.

HDWool sources Suffolk sheep wool from Top Farm, based in Loughborough, Leicester. The UK company says its wool is naturally short and spongy which gives insulation an even loft suited to light and heavy weight clothing.

HDWool



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