SUSTAINABILITY: GOTS

The textile industry is not short of initiatives to promote and certify "better" materials. GOTS has been working for more than a decade to convince brands that organic textiles are the best there is.

GOTS sets organic apart

Given the strenuous effort and the time required to get GOTS (Global Organic Textile Standard) off the ground, it is perhaps no surprise that the organisation behind the standard has to fight hard to preserve its distinct place in the textile value chain. It wants organic textiles to play "a significant role" in people's everyday lives. According to the organisation, 70% of millennial consumers say they would like to buy sustainable apparel and home textiles, but only 20% do so.

The complexity of the standard puts people off, although it accepts that establishing what we mean by sustainable (and then certifying that products that claim to be sustainable really are sustainable) is no simple matter. All the more so where organic labels are concerned, and when the criteria keep on evolving: GOTS, now on version 5, is revised every three years and the next revision will start in 2019, with February 2020 as the already-announced release date of version 6 of the standard.

Zero tolerance

Organic fibres, yarns and fabrics are not like other materials. Organic production is based on a system of farming that maintains and replenishes soil fertility without the use of what the organisation labels "toxic, persistent pesticides and fertilisers". In addition, organic production excludes genetic modification (GM crops). GOTS has been mildly critical of newer initiatives such as the Better Cotton Initiative (BCI) for tolerating the use of GM and of pesticides and even, allegedly, attempting to encourage cotton farmers to move away from organic production. All of this means paying exceptionally close attention to an already complex supply chain. There are social standards, too, which GOTS bases on key criteria from the International Labour Organisation, including the need for employment to be "freely chosen", freedom of association, safe and hygienic working conditions and no child labour.

For manufacturers

"GOTS is a standard for the processing and manufacturing stage," explains joint-managing director, Claudia Kersten. "That means we work with companies involved in ginning, spinning,



Organisations such as the Hohenstein Institute test the credentials of organic cotton from seed to end garment.

Hohenstein Institute

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dyeing, cutting, sewing and garment construction. It's third-party certification and you either pass GOTS or you fail it. We started with 25 companies and now we have more than 5,000."

She and her colleagues want to recruit more companies and organised a seminar at Intertextile Shanghai at the end of September aimed at scaling up accreditation among Chinese textile companies. Ms Kersten told her audience that the standard can serve as an instrument, as a risk management tool for them. What she means by this is that securing GOTS certification can give companies a competitive advantage. She also points to stringent action that the Chinese government has begun to take against companies in the textile supply chain that fail to meet environmental standards, including the closure of factories for non-compliance; seemingly ordinary manufacturing facilities with workers, customers, inventory, orders and investors have been forced to close their doors. "This has not happened to any of the textile companies in China that already have GOTS accreditation," she insists. India has by far the most companies with more than 1,650 accredited. Bangladesh is next with around 500, followed by Germany with 480 facilities. China has just under 300 at the moment.

Leader board

As far as finished product and retail organisations are concerned, the current organic cotton champion is C&A, coming top of the leader board for organic cotton in the 2017 and 2016 Preferred Fibre and Materials Market Reports that Textile Exchange publishes, based on its survey of around 100 companies. Mark Edwards, divisional manager at C&A China, is pleased about this success but insists there is still great scope for progress. To that end, he explains that while C&A's "sustainable cotton" (it uses BCI cotton as well as organic) consumption in 2018 will be 80 tonnes, its aim for 2019 is to use 240 tonnes. "We represent a rather dirty industry," he says candidly. "We all profit at the direct expense of poor people and of the environment. It has always been that way for those involved in fast fashion. Our focus on speed and low cost is especially bad for the environment because speed means short-cuts in environmental management, leading to water



German federal minister for economic co-operation and development, Dr Gerd Müller, was convinced after Rana Plaza that the €30 billion-per-year German textile industry needed to help make a difference.

European Commission



GOTS joint-managing director Claudia Kersten explaining the benefits of the standard to Chinese textile and apparel companies at a seminar in Shanghai in September.

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Organic cotton growing on a farm in the US.
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pollution and other problems."

Mr Edwards says textile and apparel companies are "justified targets" of the ire of campaign groups. He believes faster improvement is needed and recommends that companies invest as much as they can in sustainability, set themselves clear goals and focus on achieving those goals one by one. "Then you can start to build a sustainability jigsaw," he says.

Friends in high places

The push to add to the numbers of companies embracing organic textiles is clear but it is also obvious that support for GOTS from the industry has built up strongly since its introduction in 2006. Its four founder organisations (the Organic Trade Association in the US, the International Association of Natural Textiles in Germany, the Soil Association in the UK and the Japan Organic Cotton Association) began work on the standard four years prior to its launch. Claudia Kersten describes that time as "years of discussion, years of effort".

There have been notable successes for GOTS beyond the numbers. In 2011, the US Environmental Protection Agency announced that no company would be permitted to put an organic label on textiles unless the content was GOTS certified.

Then, in 2014, Germany's federal minister for economic cooperation and development, Dr Gerd Müller, launched a new body called the Partnership for Sustainable Textiles. He explained at the time that the aim was to achieve concrete improvements in social and environmental standards in the textiles and garment industry. Calling it an "alliance for fairness", he said consumers today do not want to wear clothes that have been produced "in places where human rights are being trampled underfoot and people are being exploited and poisoned". This partnership has an action group comprising 130 members representing all parts of the supply chain. GOTS is one of those and, as the action group's work has advanced, Claudia Kersten has won enough respect from her fellow-members to have been elevated to its steering committee. She likes this work, and has enjoyed the interaction with the minister, who is held in high esteem globally; he was given the World Food Programme's 'Hunger Hero' Award in 2017. "He was very touched by Rana Plaza [in Bangladesh]," Ms Kersten says, "and insisted Germany had to do something to make a difference because the German textile industry has revenues of €31 billion per year."

On the button

One of the results of the partnership's work is an initiative called 'Green Button', which, at a glance, will give consumers reassurance that clothing is, in the government minister's words "fair and ecologically sustainable". Claudia Kersten explains that the federal government will hold a database of products that have won the right to display the Green Button, basing their inclusion on existing standards, including GOTS. It will be reliable, transparent and verifiable for the consumer, and will help, she says, "bring a little light into the labelling jungle".

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