

SUSTAINABLE COTTON PROJECT



Back to Basics

Where organic cotton production is a niche, the BASIC cotton programme provides a more mainstream option for moving towards the reduction of chemical use in conventional cotton production, says Lynda Grose of the Sustainable Cotton Project.

Organic cotton has recently enjoyed much publicity and there are now over 30 major brands and 1200 small brands/retailers selling organic cotton products. Projections from Organic Exchange indicate that the organic retail sector will grow to around US\$2.6 billion by the end of 2008.

However, with all the excitement over the increased market demand for organic cotton, it's possible that the original touchstones of the organic movement can be overlooked. What environmental and social gains have we really achieved?

In California, the Sustainable Cotton Project (SCP) has found a vehicle that goes beyond organic in achieving real environmental and social benefits.

The original promise of the organic movement was two-fold. Firstly, to reduce chemical use on cotton, one of the most heavily sprayed crops worldwide and using some of the most acutely

toxic chemicals available in agriculture. Secondly, it wanted to create specialty products for family farmers, which would attain a premium to help create financial stability for small farms finding it increasingly difficult to stay on the land, due to the economies of scale from competing corporate farms. (In general, family farmers tend to grow more diverse crops, which create a more balanced eco system, positively affecting the landscape and ecological health of rural communities).

The sustainable cotton project (SCP) has been working in California's San Joaquin Valley (SJV) for over a decade. Through its BASIC (biological agricultural systems in cotton) programme, SCP works with conventional farmers to help implement biological farming systems. In addition to providing technical help, field scouts and mentor farmers to assist growers in the field, SCP also works to build markets for the cotton grown.

Apparel brands

SCP's original vehicle for converting acres into biological systems was organic cotton. Through its annual farm tours held in October, SCP introduced apparel company executives to farmers who were changing their practices. Over the years, SCP influenced scores of companies to consider organic cotton programmes, including Esprit, Patagonia, Nike, Cutter and Buck, Marks and Spencer, Norm Thompson, IKEA, Hanna Andersson, Eileen Fisher, Mountain Equipment Co-op, Levi, American Apparel, Prana, to name just a few.

Despite the 'success' of the SCP farm tours and slide shows, and the increased number of companies using organic cotton, there are to date few cotton acres in California that have been converted to organic.

In 2006, there were only two organic cotton farmers growing a total of 100 acres of organic cotton. The reason is that the cost of production

SUSTAINABLE COTTON PROJECT

for growing organic cotton in California is higher than retailers are willing or able to pay. Much of the growth in organic cotton acreage has been overseas where costs for the increased hand labour needed are cheaper.

Pesticide usage

In the meantime, the volume of chemicals used on California cotton in 2005 totalled over 6 million pounds, according to the PANNA database and the volume of chemicals used per pound of cotton grown remains approximately the same as it was in 1993. Furthermore, GM cotton use has grown to comprise 52% of the total California cotton crop. Clearly, organic cotton has not been an effective vehicle in California for achieving reduced chemical use and increased use of biological systems.

Despite the reduced acres of organic cotton in California, SCP's BASIC program has continued to recruit a steady number of farmers. In 2006, BASIC comprised 22 farmers and a total of 1200 acres of land.

BASIC targets the most toxic chemicals, based on Pesticide Action Network's Bad Actor category (chlorpyrifos, aldicarb, trifluralin, prometryn, dicofol, propargite, avermectin, carbofuran, profenofos, diazinon). Other criteria include the potential for groundwater contamination, volume of use and available alternatives. BASIC is also non-GM.

Over the past 7 years, BASIC growers have consistently achieved reductions in the use of miticides, fungicides and insecticides of up to 73%. (In California, farmers are required by law to report their chemical use for all crops and this data is made publicly available by the California Environmental Protection Agency Department of Pesticide Regulation. (CA EPA DPR). BASIC farmer's chemical reductions are documented and measured against this data).

In 2006, the 100 acres of organic cotton grown in California reduced chemical use by 850 pounds. In contrast, the 1200 acres of BASIC cotton grown in California reduced chemical use by 12,500 pounds, according to data from PANNA and SCP.

Moreover, because BASIC cotton fields in California yield the same volume of fibre as conventional cotton, the water use per pound of cotton grown is the same. In contrast, organic cotton yields in California are 50% that of conventional cotton, so per pound of fibre, organic is a thirstier crop.

The goal of SCP is to influence as much Californian conventional cotton acreage as

possible. The current 22 BASIC growers farm a total of 16,000 cotton acres. SCP's BASIC newsletter reaches an additional 300 growers farming throughout the state. There is a total of 287,800 acres of cotton grown in the three SJV counties where SCP works. If a market with a small premium can be found for BASIC fibre, there is great potential to convert many more acres from conventional practices, resulting in substantial chemical reductions.

Real ecological benefits

For the past 2 years, SCP has promoted the real ecological benefits and potential of BASIC cotton to retailers and manufacturers through their farm tours and presentations. SCP recommends BASIC as a complement to organic programmes; where organic is a niche, and BASIC provides a

more mainstream option for moving the rest of the product line away from conventional cotton. Where companies are using a 5% blend of organic, BASIC provides an opportunity to convert 'the other 95%'.

The authenticity of the California story is now resonating with several companies who are seriously considering BASIC cotton for future lines. Interested companies include Prana, Levi Strauss, American Apparel, del Forte Denim and Luna Textiles.

BASIC products are expected to be at retail from Spring 08 onwards.

As the products come to market, *Ecotextile News* will showcase the items and report on the response of the consumer to these new products.

To become involved with the BASIC cotton contact:

Doug Starr, Calcott, E-mail: d.star@calcott.com.

Below: A participant in the SCP programme getting some farming advice.

