

Cotton buzzword: sustainability

By CECIL H. YANCY JR.

FROM the field to the finished garment, the cotton industry is placing itself under an umbrella of sustainability.

The common thread that's moving producers and retailers of the white fiber alike is being spun by consumer demand for green products that leave a light carbon footprint on the earth.

Studies suggest that American consumers will embrace products that are

Key Points

- Sustainability is a new trend in cotton production and marketing.
- The concept of sustainability is linked to consumer demand.
- The cotton industry is branding itself as sustainable.

identified and produced under the name "sustainable."

On the retail front, companies such as

J.C. Penney are leading the way to brand U.S. cotton as a sustainable product. The \$200 billion a year retail giant is responding with innovative practices "that leave a lighter carbon footprint on the Earth," says J.C. Penney's Peter McGrath. "We recognize that customers are expecting us to produce materials in a sustainable manner, so we're seeking manufacturing partners who have the same philosophy."

This sustainable direction has led J.C. Penney and other companies to de-



BETTER BUSINESS: Grower Ted Sheely (left) and J.C. Penney's Peter McGrath are on the same page: Sustainability is a better way to do business.

velop voluntary water-quality standards for its partners in order to identify fabrics, chemicals and washes that leave a gentler impact on the environment.

J.C. Penney hopes to have the standards and compliance program in place by the end of the year. The U.S. EPA recognized the company last year for its efforts in using low-emission diesel technology in its transportation fleet.

"Customers are more conscious about what they eat and wear these days," says Peter McGrath, of Dallas-based J.C. Penney. "And you have to emotionally connect with the customer."

"Customers are telling us they want low-impact materials, efficient distribution and water-quality standards for products made around the world," McGrath says. "Sustainability is a given part of the equation."

J.C. Penney is just one of the many companies trying to make a difference and address the needs of consumers, McGrath says.

J. Berrye Worsham, president and CEO of Cotton Incorporated, finds three good reasons to listen to what the J.C. Penney executive is saying. "He's a member of the Cotton Board; he's knowledgeable about trends; and he represents the customer: J.C. Penney."

Worsham calls the company a "leading indicator of what will happen with other companies."

"Our mission is to increase the demand for cotton," Worsham says.

A sustainable industry

Cotton Incorporated launched an aggressive sustainability ad campaign beginning in January that touts the green aspects of cotton. At the bottom of the ubiquitous Cotton Incorporated cotton bloom label you'll now notice the word "natural."

"We wanted to bring back the 'Fabric of Our Life' campaign to go with our eco message. Watch and listen to the Cotton Incorporated commercial that features a shot of a cotton field: 'What fiber could be better from Mother Nature than one she grows herself?'"

Cotton Incorporated also hosted its first sustainability conference in 2007.

At the field level, farmers recognize the link to sustainability. California cotton grower Ted Sheely thinks back almost 20 years to a concept he first heard from Mississippi grower Kenneth Hood at the Beltwide Cotton Conferences: precision agriculture.

"What was good business then — more profit and more yields — fits with sustainability now," Sheely says. "We've been able to quantify what we do by using precision agriculture."

"It's just good business making more yields with fewer inputs."

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