

Environmentalists pose threat

By PAM GOLDEN

AMERICAN cotton producers who believe the World Trade Organization and Brazil are the only challenges to U.S. agricultural policy on their crop are missing a key threat: environmental organizations.

A U.S. cotton advertisement was

Key Points

- Environmental organizations are attacking U.S. cotton around the world.
- Such misinformation adversely impacts cotton in consumer markets.
- U.S. cotton leaders are countering with positive, accurate information.

challenged in the United Kingdom last year because it used the word sustainable. The challenge brought to the forefront the hotly debated definition of sustainable, and whether that definition includes genetically modified seed, pesticide and water usage, as well as subsidy programs.

An international definition of sustain-

able that's philosophically distanced from that held by U.S. producers is particularly difficult for cotton, says Allen Terhaar, executive director of Cotton Council International. Terhaar says, "U.S. producers justifiably believe they meet rigorous standards for sustainability, including the UN definition."

Nevertheless, Oxfam International in its World Food Day pronouncements infers that subsidies in developed countries are detrimental to small farmers in developing countries.

"It is time the world woke up to the need for developing-country governments to support their poor farmers, and the obligation of developed countries to help them to do so," said Teresa Caverro, head of research at Oxfam in Spain. "Misguided or inadequate national agricultural policies, coupled with unfair trade rules and poor economic advice, have created a situation where big traders and supermarkets are gaining from price rises, and small farmers and consumers are losing out."

In addition to using subsidies to challenge cotton as a sustainable industry, environmental activists also question genetically modified seed and cotton's water demands. U.S. producers may downplay debate around these issues given the facts at hand, but it's a serious debate overseas, Terhaar says. And it's a debate that impacts consumer views and market share.

"That is why we need to get back to the fundamental advantages of cotton," Terhaar says, "and we need to get the message out about all the ways the U.S. industry has worked to ensure our product is as environmentally friendly and sustainable as possible."

Cotton for many years has held its own against synthetic fiber by promoting that it's a natural fiber.

"Consumers around the world prefer natural fiber," Terhaar says. "They're willing to pay more for natural fiber. That's important because we are never going to be able to compete on price. In cotton we have a product that is both natural and renewable, and no one can argue with those terms."

The Cotton Foundation, the National Cotton Council, Cotton Incorporated and CCI have ongoing projects dedicated to providing information about sustainability to consumers.

The 2008 NCC chairman, John Pucheu, addressed one of the organization's newest projects during the 2008 Beltwide Cotton Conferences.

"Cotton sustainability — along with global demand research and understanding the industry's structure and product flow — will be the preliminary focus of 'Vision 21' that is being developed by the NCC, CCI and Cotton Incorporated, with the initial support provided by Monsanto through a Cotton Foundation project," Pucheu said.

Such information will be key to success in '09, declared by the United Nations as "The Year of the Natural Fiber."



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— Lynn Zorn, Florala, Ala.



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