



COTTON OUTLOOK

NEWS • DATA • ANALYSIS



WORLD COTTON DAY 2025



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World Cotton Day 2025



By **Ruby McGrath**
Trade and Markets Reporter, Cotton Outlook

In this, our sixth Special Feature celebrating World Cotton Day, we take stock of some of the developments that have occurred in the industry in terms of sustainability during the past 12 months. We examine the vital promotion of all that is good about our natural fibre, while highlighting pressing issues such as climate change, pollution, and cotton's declining market share in the face of polyester and fast fashion.

World Cotton Day, marked annually on October 7, provides an opportunity for all those involved in cotton to not only celebrate the biodegradable, natural fibre that clothes us and provides key employment across the globe, but also to collaborate on how to shape a future in which the environment, biodiversity, and farmers' and workers' livelihoods are protected, and where fewer and fewer

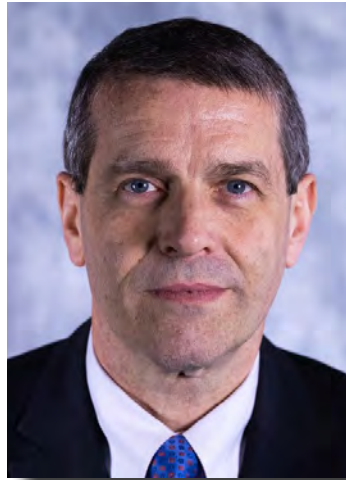
oil-based synthetic textiles accumulate at waste sites, shedding microplastics that pollute the earth.

This year, founding organisations will gather in Rome to mark the occasion, under the banner "The Fabric of Our Lives", to explore opportunities and challenges for the sector. Meanwhile, across the world everyone is invited to celebrate and promote cotton in their own way, so that the benefits of cotton can be known to all.

We are delighted to be able to share the thoughts and perspectives of people from different parts of the cotton and textiles supply chain on sustainability, traceability and advocacy, and we are truly thankful for the time and expertise put to producing such insightful contributions to this publication. Happy World Cotton Day 2025!



Cotton for Good: celebrating World Cotton Day and its global impact



By ***Eric Trachtenberg***

Executive Director, International Cotton Advisory Committee

Every year on October 7, the world comes together to celebrate a natural fiber that has shaped economies, empowered communities, and championed sustainability: cotton. Since its establishment in 2019, World Cotton Day has grown into a global event, shining a spotlight on the vital role cotton plays in our lives and the planet's future. With the theme "Cotton for Good," this annual celebration is a call to action to recognize cotton's contributions and confront the challenges it faces.

A Day of Global Recognition

The idea for World Cotton Day was first conceived at the International Cotton Advisory Committee (ICAC) in 2018. The following year, the WTO hosted the inaugural event with help from the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO), International Trade Centre (ITC), and United Nations

Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD), United Nations Industrial Development Organization (UNIDO), and the ICAC. Since then, the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) has joined as the seventh partner organization, and World Cotton Day has been celebrated annually ever since. But no one "owns" World Cotton Day — cotton and textile professionals all over the world organize events to promote the fiber's benefits and address industry challenges. People have held essay and drawing contests, conducted field visits, organized neighborhood parades, organized online and in-person conferences, and much more. World Cotton Day belongs to everyone in the global cotton textile value chain and the global community does an excellent job of flying cotton's flag on October 7 of each year.

World Cotton Day was born out of a vision to highlight cotton's significance in alleviating poverty, empowering women, promoting sustainable practices, and much more. The inaugural event, held in 2019 at World Trade Organization (WTO) headquarters in Geneva, brought together more than 800 participants, including ministers, senior government officials, and industry leaders from around the globe. In 2021 — less than two years after the event was launched — the United Nations reserved October 7 as World Cotton Day on its permanent calendar. This recognition was a monumentally important step, amplifying the event's visibility and reinforcing the global importance of cotton. It also underscored the UN's commitment to fostering sustainable practices within the cotton industry and supporting the millions of people whose livelihoods depend on it.

The Many Benefits of Cotton

World Cotton Day is a precious opportunity to educate the world about the incredible benefits cotton provides to us all on a daily basis. Here's why this natural fiber deserves the spotlight:

- **Poverty Alleviation:** Cotton is a lifeline for millions, particularly in developing countries. Every tonne of cotton provides full-time, year-round employment for five people, offering critical job prospects in regions where such opportunities are often scarce.
- **Women's Empowerment:** Remarkably, 43% of cotton farmers worldwide are women. Cotton farming not only provides income but also fosters gender equality by empowering women with greater autonomy and decision-making power in their communities.
- **Biodegradability:** In a world drowning in plastic pollution, cotton stands out as a sustainable alternative. Unlike synthetic fibers that can take centuries to decompose, cotton biodegrades in weeks to months.
- **Carbon Sequestration:** Cotton cultivation has great potential to play a significant role in combating climate change. While producing

one kilogram of cotton emits 1.7 kilograms of CO₂, the plant absorbs 2.2 kilograms of CO₂ in its biomass, making it a net carbon sink.

“Cotton for Good”: A Theme with Purpose

The theme “Cotton for Good” encapsulates the mission of World Cotton Day. It's a rallying cry to:

- **Promote Cotton Globally:** By increasing demand for cotton, the industry can support more livelihoods and drive sustainable practices.
- **Dispel Myths:** Social media and misinformation have perpetuated myths about cotton. World Cotton Day aims to set the record straight by sharing the #TruthAboutCotton.
- **Foster Collaboration:** The day encourages businesses and organizations to work together to advance the cotton and textile industry's goals.

World Cotton Day was always intended to be a celebration ... a chance to recognize the positive impacts cotton provides to people and planet — and everyone in the world can (and should) take part in it.

This year, the original partner organizations will gather at FAO headquarters in Rome, under the theme “*The Fabric of Our Lives*.” Jointly organized by the Republic of Chad, FAO, and ITC, this year's celebration will shine a spotlight on cotton's essential role in livelihoods, economic growth, and sustainable development. The event will explore the opportunities and challenges facing the sector, from global trade dynamics to the urgent need for inclusivity, innovation, and environmental stewardship.

The program will feature high-level discussions and interactive segments designed to inspire action and showcase innovation. *Voices of the Next Generation: Transforming Cotton into Design* will present fresh perspectives from young designers, students, and entrepreneurs, highlighting creative uses of cotton from concept to finished product. Meanwhile, *From Field to Fashion: Local Cotton Transformation*



in C4+ Countries will celebrate artisanal traditions, market opportunities, and youth engagement in building a vibrant, locally driven cotton industry. These sessions will emphasize how value addition, local manufacturing, and cultural heritage can strengthen resilience and sustainability across the cotton supply chain.

World Cotton Day is a call to renew global commitments to a fair, inclusive, and sustainable cotton sector. By addressing pressing challenges such as competition from synthetic fibers, changing weather patterns, and shifting consumer demand, the event aims to chart a path toward greater efficiency, resilience, and opportunity. With millions of people and their families depending on cotton for their livelihoods, the day serves as a reminder that this natural fiber is not only a cornerstone of global trade but also, truly, “the fabric of our lives.”

A Call to Action

Despite its many benefits, cotton faces significant challenges. The rise of

synthetic fibers, fueled by fast fashion, has led to a decline in cotton’s market share. Additionally, myths and mistruths about cotton continue to circulate, particularly on social media.

This is why World Cotton Day is so important. It’s a chance for the global cotton and textiles industry to unite and advocate for the world’s most important natural fiber. By educating people about cotton’s benefits and promoting its use, we can help shift the narrative and create a more sustainable future.

As we celebrate World Cotton Day on October 7, let’s remember that cotton is more than just a fabric — it’s a global force for good. From empowering women to combating plastic pollution, cotton has the power to transform lives and protect our planet. So, let’s raise our voices, share the truth, and champion cotton — not just on this day, but every day. Together, we can ensure that cotton continues to be a cornerstone of sustainability and a symbol of hope for generations to come.

Making the label count for cotton: why accurate sustainability metrics matter



By **Elke Hortmeyer**,

Head of Economic Research & Communications at Bremen Cotton Exchange
and Co-Spokesperson at Make the Label Count

Cotton is one of the world's most important natural fibres - renewable, biodegradable, and vital for the livelihoods of millions of farmers. Yet today, the way its sustainability is measured could define its future. Increasingly, global textile markets are shaped not just by fashion trends, but by environmental labelling systems intended to inform consumer choices. Among these, the European Union's Product Environmental Footprint (PEF) methodology has emerged as a frontrunner, designed to underpin future product labelling and green claims.

But behind the promise of transparency lies a critical challenge: current environmental impact models often fail to reflect the true benefits of natural fibres like cotton. The risk? Simplified scoring systems may unintentionally favour synthetic fibres - oil-based and persistent in nature - over fibres that are renewable and biodegradable. For cotton, this could have far-reaching implications for demand,

market access, and its role in delivering a sustainable future for textiles.

This is where the Make the Label Count (MTLC) campaign steps in.

What is Make the Label Count?

MTLC is a global coalition of natural fibre industries, researchers, NGOs, and sustainability experts advocating for fair and accurate environmental labelling in textiles. The campaign was launched to address the limitations of the EU's PEF methodology, which, in its current form, overlooks critical aspects of natural fibres' performance and ecological contributions while ignoring some of the synthetic fibre environmental impacts.

Many cotton industry bodies have officially joined MTLC, recognising a shared challenge with other natural fibres: how sustainability is measured matters just as much as how it is delivered. If the



policies risk misguiding consumers and brands, favouring fossil fuel-based textiles over natural fibres that offer genuine circularity and biodegradability.

Positive ecosystem services ignored

Cotton grown under climate-smart or regenerative systems can provide measurable environmental benefits, from soil health improvement and biodiversity support to carbon sequestration in soils. These services enhance resilience and contribute to climate mitigation, yet they are not accounted for in current models. Failing to capture these positive impacts undervalues natural fibres and misrepresents their role in sustainable production systems.

Assumed behaviour vs. real-world evidence

Policies increasingly link sustainability to product longevity and physical durability, yet these assumptions often ignore real consumer behaviour.

Synthetic fibres perform well in lab durability tests, but most fast fashion items - made from synthetics - are discarded quickly due to fast changing fashion trends, not material failure. Current models reward this technical strength while overlooking natural fibres like cotton, which offer other forms of durability. Cotton garments are easier to repair, maintain comfort, and often enjoy multiple life cycles through resale and donation. These practical and emotional durability factors drive real-world longevity but remain largely unmeasured in today's metrics.

Grower voices and rural livelihoods excluded

PEF methodology development has largely excluded the social and economic dimensions of sustainability, sidelining cotton growers - who are central to rural economies in over 70 countries. Millions of smallholders rely on cotton as a primary source of income, supporting education, healthcare, and community development. Ignoring these factors not only creates an incomplete sustainability picture but also

methodology guiding consumer-facing labels is flawed, the very fibres that support regenerative agriculture, rural economies, and circular systems could be penalised.

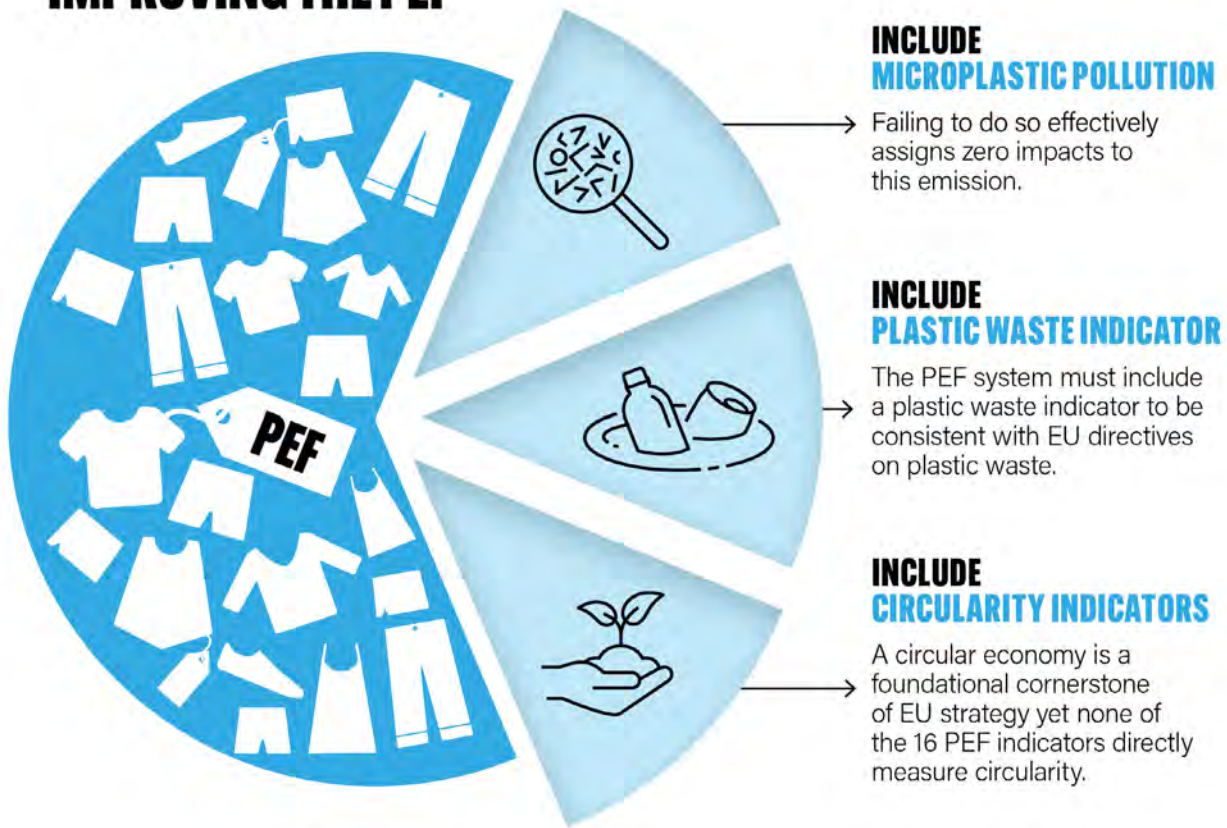
The problem with current metrics

The PEF system relies heavily on Life Cycle Assessment (LCA) - a tool designed to measure environmental impacts across a product's life. While LCA provides valuable insights, it is not a suitable method to measure agriculturally farmed products such as cotton and compare them to mined products like polyester, hence the current PEF approach fails in several key areas when applied to textiles.

Overreliance on PEF & missing metrics

Despite well-documented shortcomings, the European Commission continues to make the PEF methodology the cornerstone of its regulatory agenda - including the Ecodesign for Sustainable Products Regulation (ESPR) and the framework for substantiating green claims. This insistence persists even though the model overlooks critical factors such as microplastic and plastic waste pollution - issues strongly linked to synthetic fibres. By relying on a flawed and incomplete system, these

IMPROVING THE PEF



INCLUDE MICROPLASTIC POLLUTION

Failing to do so effectively assigns zero impacts to this emission.

INCLUDE PLASTIC WASTE INDICATOR

The PEF system must include a plastic waste indicator to be consistent with EU directives on plastic waste.

INCLUDE CIRCULARITY INDICATORS

A circular economy is a foundational cornerstone of EU strategy yet none of the 16 PEF indicators directly measure circularity.

undermines fair policy outcomes that affect livelihoods globally.

The result? An incomplete picture that risks shaping policy and consumer behaviour in ways that undermine natural fibres and incentivise further reliance on fossil fuel-based textiles.

What has the campaign achieved so far?

Despite these challenges, MTLC has made significant progress - turning a niche technical issue into a recognised priority in global sustainability policy debates.

1. Securing commitments to improve metrics

The EU instructed its Technical Advisory Board to develop better indicators for natural fibres, including biodiversity impacts, better circularity indicators as well as biogenic carbon storage. These elements are essential to recognising cotton's role as a renewable fibre and its contribution to circularity.

2. Elevating critical issues

The campaign helped achieve formal acknowledgment of microplastic pollution in EU discussions – a key milestone for fair fibre

comparisons. Synthetics are responsible for microplastic leakage, a burden cotton does not carry.

3. Building a strong, science-based coalition

Since launch, MTLC has: Hosted over 100 speaking engagements and three policy events, engaged with 80+ EU policymakers directly, doubled coalition membership, adding key sectors including cotton and garnered strong support from researchers, NGOs, and industry stakeholders - cementing its credibility as a constructive, evidence-driven voice.

How the conversation has shifted

In just three years, MTLC has moved the sustainability debate beyond simplistic narratives:

- Raised awareness of the limitations of PEF in accurately assessing natural fibres.
- Challenged the “one-score-fits-all” approach, which risks misleading consumers.
- Positioned natural fibres as central to circularity and nature-positive solutions for fashion.

ALMOST 70% OF CLOTHING IS MADE FROM PLASTIC.



But as the EU prepares to implement its Digital Product Passport, tighten green claims regulations, and finalise labelling rules, the stakes remain high. Without decisive improvements, cotton risks being locked into a system that undervalues its benefits -and the world risks doubling down on fossil fuel-based textiles.

Why we must build on this momentum

The campaign has achieved a great deal, but the work is far from done. For cotton, advocating for a fair and credible PEF, is not just a technical detail - it is a defining issue for market access and consumer perception. Labels influence purchasing decisions, and regulations shape supply chains. If environmental scoring systems remain flawed, they could accelerate the trend toward synthetics at a time when the fashion industry urgently needs renewable, circular, and biodegradable fibres.

A call to action

As we celebrate World Cotton Day 2025 under the banner of “Cotton for Good”, we

must remember that good intentions alone do not guarantee good outcomes. Fair and accurate sustainability metrics are not a “nice to have” - they are essential to driving the right choices for the planet and for people.

The Make the Label Count campaign has shown what is possible when industries unite around science and transparency. Now, it is time to convert influence into impact:

- Push for updated PEF models that account for natural fibres’ unique benefits.
- Ensure microplastic emissions, circularity, and biodiversity are fully integrated into environmental assessments.
- Advocate for inclusive policymaking that gives voice to growers and protects rural livelihoods.

Cotton has a vital role to play in a sustainable fashion future - but only if it competes on a level playing field. By making the label count, we make sustainability count - for consumers, for farmers, and for the planet.

Sustainability initiatives: where are we now?



By **Ruby McGrath**
Trade and Markets Reporter, Cotton Outlook

This time last year, it was highlighted that the ideas gaining the most traction in cotton sustainability were traceability and regenerative practices. Reflecting on the past 12 months, it appears that those 'models' have cemented themselves as cornerstones in the work of many initiatives that look to provide solutions and support projects across the supply chain.

Traceability technologies and platforms have proliferated in recent years, likely accelerating in response to requirements laid out in rapidly evolving legislation, most notably in the EU, making the tracking of raw materials from source to final product a must-have, rather than a unique selling point for a modest proportion of goods. While the ability to trace cotton and tell the story of its journey to consumers may present an opportunity to improve awareness and demand, it has been stressed that farmers must not be unfairly

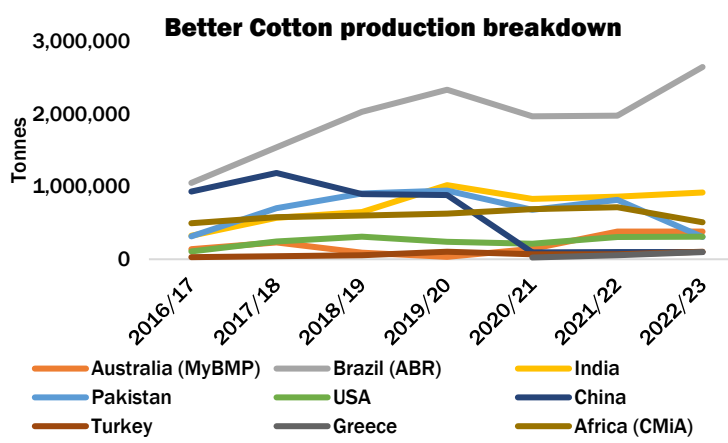
burdened with the costs while brands take the credit as the final products are labelled and sold. In addition, as has been explored elsewhere in these pages, it is vital that well-meaning legislation does not put cotton at a disadvantage versus oil-based synthetics.

Meanwhile, the effects of climate change, biodiversity loss, and soil degradation continue to threaten the sustainability of cotton production, not to mention the health of the wider environment. Thus, regenerative agricultural practices have gained popularity as producers and organisations seek to minimise the negative impacts of production, while actively taking measures to improve soils and the environment. A number of initiatives have developed standards in order to verify regenerative practices and measure their impact, which could offer the potential for premium payments for producers, in addition to restoring soils and biodiversity.

It is increasingly evident that significant strides have been made in cotton sustainability since the first World Cotton Day, and this article will briefly explore how some initiatives have expanded their work over the past year. Nevertheless, it should not be forgotten that the challenges faced by the sector are mounting, and the good that cotton does must be promoted and celebrated more than ever.

Better Cotton

The largest sustainability initiative in terms of volume is Better Cotton (BC). BC operates in many producing countries globally, with benchmarked programmes in Brazil, Australia, Greece, and Israel. In 2023/24, output under the scheme amounted to 5.87 million tonnes, representing almost a quarter of total world production, from 1.39 million farmers licensed to sell their lint as Better Cotton. Brand Members sourced 2.6 million tonnes in that season, up three percent from the previous campaign, while in 2024/25 an additional 519 members joined.

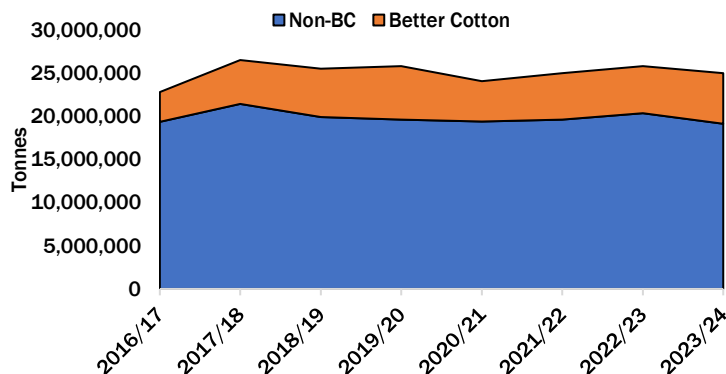


This year, Better Cotton published a 10-year impact report detailing its work in the United States between 2014 and 2024. It was noted that across the US cotton belt, over 300 producers are licensed on average each season, accounting for over 10 percent of total US output in the past five years. The initiative also highlighted that despite issues such as volatile prices and often difficult and changeable growing conditions, producers have increasingly adopted sustainable

practices, resulting in improved soil health and biodiversity, and reduced inputs and water usage.

The organisation meanwhile announced in February that it had completed its

Better Cotton and World Production



transition to become a certification scheme. The change means that growers seeking to comply with BC standards are now required to have the relevant metrics verified by accredited third parties in order to further improve impartiality.

Furthermore, at its 2025 conference in June, it was announced that the initiative will be taking the final steps to become a regenerative standard within the next 12 months, to expand and verify the use of regenerative agricultural practices under the standard. Regenerative BC lint is expected to be available from the 2026/27 season.

Better Cotton also reflected on a year and a half of its traceability platform, which facilitates the tracking of certified cotton through the supply chain, known as Physical Better Cotton (PBC). The initiative reported that 316,000 tonnes of traceable cotton from 13 countries have been sourced by spinners, and 1,900 suppliers are now eligible to sell PBC.

CMiA

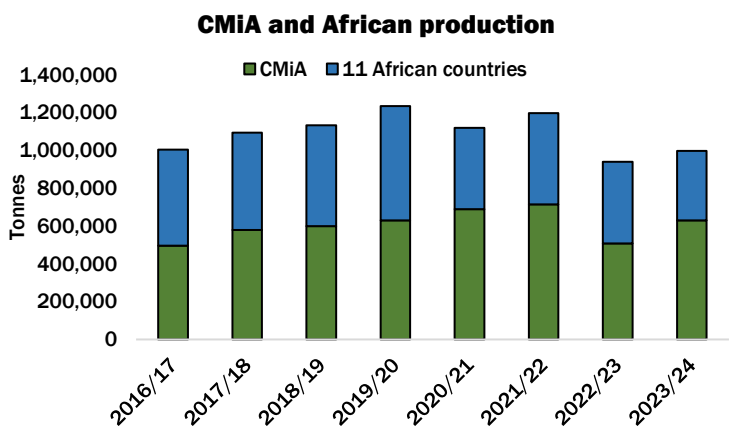
Cotton Made in Africa (CMiA) of the Aid by Trade Foundation (AbTF) is a non-profit operating primarily in ten cotton-producing countries in Africa. This initiative focuses mainly on smallholder growers that make up the vast majority of cotton farms on

the continent, working to improve social, economic and environmental sustainability.

In the 2023/24 season, cotton produced and verified under the CMiA standard amounted to 630,500 tonnes, around a third of total African output, representing an increase of 24 percent from the previous campaign, but 12 percent below the quantity produced in 2021/22.

As a proportion of total production in the 11 African countries in which the initiative operates, though, cotton output verified by CMiA has increased from 49 percent in 2016/17, to 63 percent in 2023/24, demonstrating growth overall despite challenges such as climate change, pests, and volatile prices.

Cotton verified under the CMiA Organic standard meanwhile increased by a substantial 50 percent on the year in 2023/24. In addition, AbTF announced



the successful implementation of the Regenerative Cotton Standard (RCS) in Tanzania and India in 2023, involving 25,000 farmers and 35,000 hectares of land, with production placed at 12,500 tonnes of lint, including 4,400 in Maharashtra, India. This Standard pays particular attention to the regeneration of nature and soil health, improving biodiversity, and building resilience against climate change, using farming methods such as reduced tillage, composting, and carbon sequestration.

Meanwhile, as demand and legislative requirements for traceability have increased, so have solutions and systems. AbTF offers

verification by independent organisations and blockchain technology and a Hard Identity Preserved (HIP) chain of custody system to track cotton through the supply chain. Since 2022, the HIP system has been implemented by approximately 350 actors from 19 countries. Furthermore, the Foundation developed its Transparency Standard in 2024, setting out requirements for buying or selling verified cotton.

US Cotton Trust Protocol (USCTP)

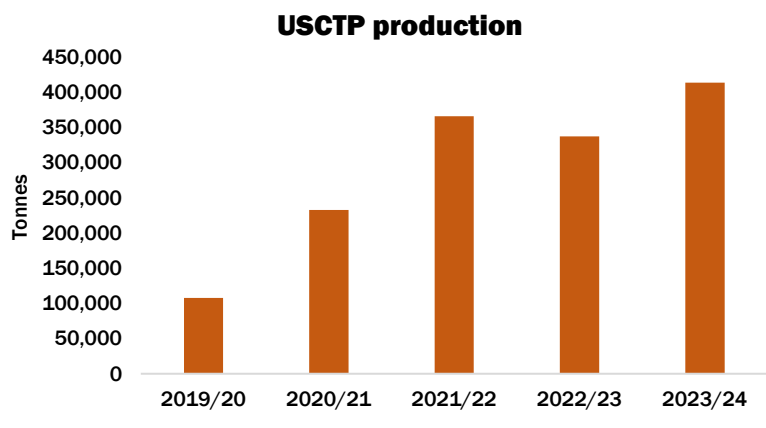
In the United States, the US Cotton Trust Protocol (USCTP) serves its membership (comprised of growers, mills, manufacturers, brands and retailers) by promoting, measuring and verifying sustainable practices and their outcomes.

This initiative tracks several environmental metrics, including land use, soil carbon, soil conservation, water management, emissions, and energy efficiency, and reported improvements across those themes from both a 2015 and a 2020 baseline. In addition, USCTP offers its own traceability solution, the Protocol Consumption Management Solution (PCMS), providing tracking for both US cotton and USCTP-certified cotton.

The proportion of US cotton under the programme has increased further, from around two percent in its pilot year (2019/20), to roughly 16 percent in 2023/24 (approximately 413,700 tonnes), up five percentage points from the previous season. In 2023, 1.7 million planted acres had been enrolled across the US cotton belt, while in 2024 that figure rose to 2.1 million, compared to an initial enrolment in 2019 of 593,000 acres. Furthermore, 560,000 acres had been enrolled in the Protocol's Climate Smart Cotton Program, producing almost 200,000 tonnes of cotton.

USCTP also announced in September that it had launched a framework for a Field Partner Program pilot to formally recognise regenerative agriculture practices and measure outcomes, in order to offer regenerative cotton options to brands. This year's pilot aims to test and refine the program before wider implementation, and

will assess market demand and traceability prospects.



Regenagri

As mentioned above, regenerative agriculture has continued to gain prominence, as have standards and benchmarks to measure and verify the practices and results. Regenagri is one such initiative, focusing on supporting farmers and organisations globally in the transition to regenerative practices to improve the health of the land, while also offering opportunities for producers to benefit from additional funds through subsidies and carbon credits as well as reducing input costs.

Certification and verification from the farm to the finished product meanwhile makes the cotton traceable, a selling point for brands, particularly as due diligence reporting becomes increasingly desirable and even a legal requirement.

This programme announced that 2,473,500 tonnes of cotton had been produced under its standard in 2023, from 1,166,600 hectares of land, and 219,500 farms. The initiative's latest annual report indicates that the water usage and greenhouse gas emissions of those involved in the programme had declined, while carbon stock in soils had increased.

Cotton Connect

Meanwhile, CottonConnect's work in the 2023/24 season involved training over 450,000 farmers in sustainable practices

across six countries (Bangladesh, China, Egypt, India, Pakistan and Turkey). The REEL Cotton Programme seeks to reduce environmental impact while improving growers' incomes, and reported success across metrics in that campaign compared to a control group, including reduced chemical inputs and water usage, as well as higher yields and increased profits.

CottonConnect also introduced its REEL Regenerative Code in 2021 and has been developing regenerative practices to support smallholder farmers. In addition, its Organic Cotton Farmer Training

Programme has involved producers in Pakistan and India, and those taking part reported substantially lower input costs overall, resulting in greater profits.

Cotton produced under this initiative can be traced via its TraceBale tool, tracking information and data such as the location of the farm and the inputs used during production, and the subsequent transactions as the cotton moves through the supply chain. Using the tool, almost 193,500 tonnes of lint were traced in 2023/24.

Organic initiatives

Some initiatives are focused primarily on organic cotton production and promotion, such as the Global Organic Textiles Standard (GOTS) and the Organic Cotton Accelerator (OCA).

GOTS noted a five-percent annual increase in its certified facilities in 2024, to 15,440, across 87 countries. In order for final products to be labelled as GOTS certified, they must contain a minimum of 70 percent certified organic fibres, and operators throughout the supply chain as well as wholesalers (including exporters and importers) must undergo an on-site annual inspection cycle and hold a valid certification. GOTS has also developed a traceability system to track materials through the value chain, Global Trace-Base, which was introduced last year. Moreover, a new standard is being developed, the Global Responsible Textile Standard (GRTS),



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to include responsible fibres beyond organic cotton.

Meanwhile, OCA reported that 100,000 farmers had signed up to its Farm Programme in the 2024/25 season, up from just over 82,000 in 2023/24, with 106,000 hectares dedicated to production. Last season, 18 brands participated in the Programme and 92 percent of the available organic cotton had been purchased, while 58 percent of in-conversion cotton was procured, with premiums paid to farmers at an average of eight percent.

Looking ahead

This by no means exhaustive exploration of developments in cotton sustainability over the past year demonstrates the

impressive expansion of work done by initiatives, and of course producers and actors throughout the supply chain, to research, promote, measure, verify, and track sustainable practices and progress.

Turning to the future, however, participants across the sector will need to increasingly collaborate and coordinate their noble efforts in advancing sustainability and promoting cotton in the face of faltering demand, mounting competition against synthetics, new legislation, climate change, and rising costs and volatility. World Cotton Day makes for the perfect reminder to celebrate the progress made already, while thinking ahead to ensure cotton continues to be the ‘Fabric of Our Lives’.



Starting with farmers, let us regenerate our soil and protect our future



By ***Eva Benavidez Clayton***,
Senior Director of Demand and Engagement at the Better Cotton Initiative

It has been six years since the first World Cotton Day, which is celebrated every 7 October. The event was not created by clothing brands or fashion enthusiasts. It was brought to life by the World Trade Organisation upon the request of four African cotton-producing nations – Benin, Burkina Faso, Chad, and Mali – to recognise and celebrate their work. World Cotton Day started with farmers.

While this is always a special date for the team at the Better Cotton Initiative (BCI), as we take stock of progress and look to the future, this year feels even more momentous, as it also marks 20 years since the inception of our organisation. In 2005, a WWF-led multistakeholder roundtable met to discuss the future of sustainability in our sector, and the Better Cotton Initiative was born.

Fast forward two decades and BCI now manages a global field-level standard, tailoring its programmes to support the needs of specific farming communities across 15 countries, and accounting for nearly a quarter of the cotton produced around the world. We remain global by first thinking local, and that will continue to be front of mind as we place increasing emphasis on a key pillar of our standard over the coming months: regenerative agriculture.

In collaboration with our network of Programme and Strategic Partners, BCI will offer farming communities the training, tools and guidance they need to continue to adopt the regenerative practices promoted through our standard. This reflects two key values that have always been at the heart of our approach – a determination to continuously improve and a recognition

that we will only succeed by working in partnership with cotton farmers.

This is as much true today as it has been in the past two decades. BCI now licenses more than 1.4 million farmers who produce 24% of global cotton volumes. We also have a vast membership comprising retailers, brands, cotton traders, and everyone in between, connecting supply with growing demand.

We created a global traceability solution, transitioned to a certification scheme, and have just launched a new product label for fashion brands and retailers to publicise the BCI Cotton in their products and better inform consumers about where their purchase comes from.

From Trade Wars to Climate Change

The changes have been immense, and while BCI looks drastically different to what it was back in 2005, so too does the landscape in which we operate.

Trade wars, legislation, and consumer awareness are three widely talked-about factors affecting sustainability in fashion and textiles today. For cotton, though, the most impactful one is something closer to home.

Extreme weather – from droughts and scorching heat to floods, such as the ones that put much of Pakistan’s farms underwater in 2022 and those hitting the Punjab region’s farms hard this summer – has left the agricultural sector in a precarious position, and the threat of climate disasters continues to loom large.

The Cotton 2040 initiative, convened by Forum for the Future and supported by BCI, may have concluded its work in 2023, but the research and projections it published remain valid.

The initiative estimated that by 2040, around [half of the world’s cotton growing regions will face high or very high-risk exposure to at least one climate hazard](#), whilst some regions could be exposed to as many as seven of them.

It reiterates why boosting the environmental and social resilience of cotton farming communities around the world is so important. Global progress against the



goals of the 2015 Paris Climate Agreement is off-track. In particular, the decision by the current US administration to once again withdraw from the treaty will further hamper the likelihood of success in meeting CO₂ reduction targets to limit the planet’s temperature at 1.5°C above pre-industrial levels.

In the face of these challenges two things become increasingly clear if we are going to continue to be successful and deliver our mission. Firstly, with farming communities most exposed to these threats it is essential that we continue to place farmers at the heart of everything we do. And secondly, that we cannot simply seek to reduce the impact of cotton production but must actively aim to revitalise, replenish and regenerate the natural assets that we depend upon. This is why in June of this year, at the 2025 Better Cotton Conference in İzmir, Türkiye, I announced our organisation’s decision to complete the evolution of our field-level standard into one that fully embraces regenerative agriculture.

A Regenerative Future

The Better Cotton Initiative’s farm-level standard, which cotton farmers must meet to become certified, is already recognised to cover many of the key tenets of regenerative agriculture. All farmers that we support work with regenerative practices in some capacity.

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It is vital that we continue to build on this progress. Encouraging cotton growers around the world to champion and increase the adoption of regenerative agriculture is a vital step to ensure that cotton is produced in a way that protects and nurtures the natural environment. Like World Cotton Day, the regeneration of our environment starts with farmers.

The benefits are abundantly clear. Regenerative practices improve soils and increase biodiversity, two of our greatest weapons in the fight against climate change. Like our oceans and forests, soil can capture huge quantities of CO₂ from the atmosphere, while diverse animal and plant life is integral to sustaining fully functional ecosystems.

The potential for regenerative agriculture to accelerate our field-level impact as we continue to drive improvements across all

that we do makes me very optimistic about the years to come.

The launch of our new product label is a testament to that optimism. To many, it may just look like a piece of paper breaking down an item's composition, but look closely and you'll see that it represents much more. The label is the result of our recently implemented certification scheme – independent third parties verifying the conditions in which the cotton was grown – and our traceability solution, which informs companies about the origin of the BCI Cotton they source.

Our new label brings factual and vital information to the fore. It is the certificate of a journey successfully made, from farms to stores – and towards a more sustainable future.



Beyond the label: cotton traceability from fiber forward



By *MeiLin Wan*,
Founder & CEO, GenuTrace

On World Cotton Day, we celebrate not only the “fiber that clothes the world”, but also the people and processes that shape its journey from seed to shelf.

From Fiber Forward: Why the Farmer is the First Link in Traceability

Every claim about sustainable cotton, whether organic, regenerative, or low-carbon, starts with a single question: where did this cotton come from?

Unfortunately, the answer isn’t always clear. Cotton often changes hands multiple times before it is spun into yarn, woven into fabric, or stitched into a final garment. In many supply chains, growers are abstracted from the process, and their commendable practices at the start of the journey deserve to be carried all the way to the shelf, ensuring every claim is backed by proof and

every story stays intact.

The only way to achieve this is to start with the fiber and the farmer.

Scientific traceability methods such as stable isotope analysis can verify the geographic origin of cotton at the fiber, yarn, and greige fabric stages. By establishing forensic baselines for specific growing regions, these tools make it possible to confirm if a bale truly came from India, Egypt, Brazil or the U.S. Forensic tools don’t just trace the cotton as they reveal a story shaped by its place of origin, the practices of its growers, and the people behind its journey.

Verification goes hand in hand with validation of the grower’s voice. Traceability efforts should include direct engagement with farming communities, so as to recognize their insights, realities, and constraints, but farmers cannot carry the

cost of traceability alone. Nor should they be asked to retrofit their operations to meet evolving sustainability metrics set far from the field.

Instead, all stakeholders: brands, manufacturers, certifiers, and consumers, need to share in the responsibility for the long term. When cotton prices remain below the cost of production in many regions, sustainability cannot be treated as a cost to shift onto others; it must be a shared investment across the entire value chain.

When Physical Meets Digital: The New Landscape of Traceability

Twenty years ago, traceability in textiles was a niche concept, something reserved for specialized programs and a handful of pioneering brands. Today, it is a **strategic imperative** woven into sourcing decisions, compliance strategies, and brand trust.

Driven by rising regulation (e.g., UFLPA, EUDR, CSRD), risk of reputational harm, and a more conscious consumer base, brands are increasingly expected to provide verifiable evidence, not just paperwork, to back up their claims. The result is a growing ecosystem of traceability technologies, including but not limited to:

Forensic methods — stable isotope analysis, DNA tagging, and trace element profiling to scientifically confirm geographic origin and fiber content.

Embedded additive markers — luminescent, nano-tagged, or molecular tracers integrated into fibers or yarns for authentication at any point in the supply chain.

Digital platforms — blockchain, digital product passports, and secure databases to record, store, and share verified supply chain data.

Hybrid systems — layering physical verification with secure digital records for a full “proof chain” from source to shelf.

Each technology has its strengths, but no single approach fits every supply chain. The most effective strategies layer scientific proof with transparent digital records, guided by a clear understanding of what matters most, regulatory compliance, origin

verification, brand storytelling, or all of the above. Taking a modular approach means helping brands define what “traceability” should mean for them: sometimes it’s fiber-forward isotopic testing to meet regulations, other times it’s a digital product passport integrated with mill-level quality management systems. In every case, traceability must be tailored, not templated.

Embedding Traceability from Source to Shelf

A tailored approach recognizes that traceability can, and should, be applied at multiple points in the value chain. Whether it’s verifying raw fiber at the source, testing greige goods to establish a clear baseline, or auditing finished products to confirm claims, the goal remains the same: building a layered, credible record of a product’s journey from origin to market. Achieving this requires true collaboration, traceability cannot simply be pushed downstream; it must be embedded throughout the supply chain. That means mapping suppliers, aligning on sample collection procedures, and integrating testing protocols into production schedules.

It also requires investment in digital systems that are only as reliable as the data they hold. When accurate, verified information goes in, and meaningful, trustworthy insights come out.

From Claims to Proof

Consumers today are more informed than ever. They want sustainability, yes, but they also want proof.

This demand for verification is no longer driven by consumers alone; it’s now embedded in law. In the U.S., the UFLPA requires importers to prove their goods are free from links to forced labor. In the EU, the EUDR will soon mandate geolocation and deforestation-free proof for agricultural imports. The CSRD and CSDDD are also raising the bar for corporate disclosures and due diligence.

These regulations make one thing clear: paper trails are no longer enough.

That’s where science-backed traceability comes in. By combining physical testing with integrated digital systems, brands

and mills can generate measurable, verifiable, and repeatable evidence building credibility, meeting regulatory demands, and strengthening supply chain resilience.

Building Traceability Together

To move the industry forward, we must view traceability not as a product to buy, but as a shared practice to build together.

That begins with bringing all stakeholders, growers, ginners, spinners, mills, brands, labs, and consumers into the conversation. It requires acknowledging trade-offs, understanding regional realities, and co-developing frameworks that are feasible, affordable, and fair.

Investing in regional lab capacity is a key step toward reducing turnaround times and making testing more accessible. Equally important is aligning incentives so that traceability is seen not as a burden, but as a benefit, one that opens premium markets, informs better sourcing decisions, and advances sustainable development goals.

If you claim it, can you prove it™

Traceability is not a silver bullet, but it is a compass. It guides us away from greenwash and guesswork, and toward a future where claims are credible, and cotton is both sustainable and substantiated.

As the definition of “sustainable cotton” continues to evolve, let’s ensure that farmers are not left behind, that brands are not caught unprepared, and that consumers are empowered to choose not just what feels good, but what’s been proven good.

That future is already taking shape through key trends:

Fiber-forward verification — locking in proof of origin at the raw material stage before blending or processing can obscure the truth.

Modular integration — combining forensic science, embedded markers, and digital systems based on each supply chain’s risks and goals.

Regulatory alignment — building programs that meet current laws while anticipating what’s next.

Story-driven transparency — turning verified supply chain data into consumer-facing narratives that inspire trust.

Shared responsibility — ensuring the costs and benefits of traceability are distributed across growers, manufacturers, brands, and retailers.

Because if you claim it, you must be able to prove it. And that proof starts with cotton fiber.

MeiLin Wan

Founder & CEO, GenuTrace

MeiLin Wan is the Founder and CEO of GenuTrace, a leader in science-based supply chain traceability with over 20 years of expertise in cotton and textiles. She has helped global brands and manufacturers move “beyond the label” by verifying product origins, substantiating sustainability claims, and protecting brand integrity—always starting from the fiber forward.

A pioneer in applying DNA and additive tracers, genomic testing, and stable isotope analysis to textiles, MeiLin has overseen the forensic verification of nearly a billion pounds of cotton, recycled polyester, and

other fibers for various retailers. Her work bridges physical and digital proof, integrating scientific testing with secure digital records to build credible, repeatable evidence across the supply chain.

A recognized thought leader, MeiLin’s insights have been featured in *The New York Times*, *The Wall Street Journal*, *Reuters*, *Just Style*, and *Vogue*. She has co-authored influential works on sustainability and traceability and was named one of the “Outstanding 50 Asian Americans” for her contributions to supply chain transparency. Her guiding principle reflects the heart of her work: *If you claim it, you must be able to prove it™—and that proof starts with the cotton fiber.*



Data, trust, and traceability: how the U.S. Cotton Trust Protocol is reshaping the cotton supply chain

By Daren Abney,

Executive Director of the U.S. Cotton Trust Protocol

In today's fashion and textile industries, the demand for transparency is becoming increasingly important. Stakeholders are more invested in supply chains, demanding verifiable proof of sustainable and responsible practices.

Leading the way is the U.S. Cotton Trust Protocol, the sustainability program for U.S. cotton growers and traceability platform for all U.S. Cotton. Through six years of increasing grower enrollment, new global brand and retailer members, and a robust data-driven framework, the program is helping to build a more resilient and responsible cotton supply chain.

Continued Growth at the Grassroots

The foundation of any agricultural sustainability program lies with its growers. Despite a challenging growing environment

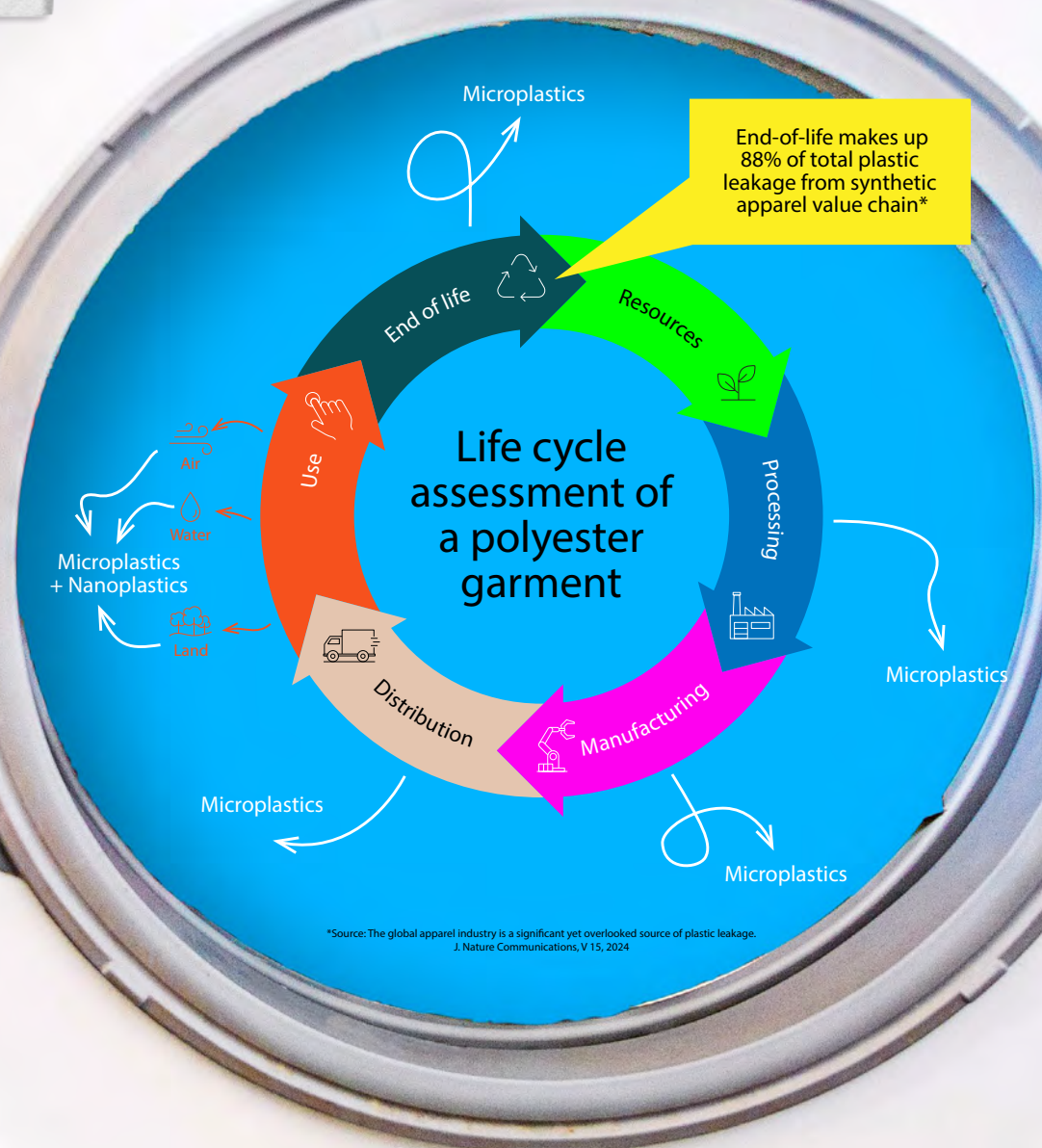
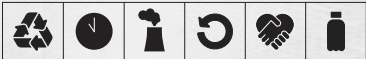
in the 2023/2024 crop year, the Trust Protocol achieved its [*sixth consecutive year of record growth*](#), with a 14% increase in grower enrollment and an 18% increase in planted acres.

So, what is driving this momentum? The benefits for growers are tangible and multifaceted. They receive actionable insights to help them optimize operations, improve overall efficiency and demonstrate their commitment to responsible practices through measurement and verification.

The program measures a variety of farming practices, including regenerative agriculture techniques. For example, last year's [*Annual Report*](#) revealed that 63% of enrolled acres implemented no-till or conservation tillage methods, and 70% integrated cover crops—both crucial practices for improving soil health and sequestering carbon. By providing data and

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*Source: The global apparel industry is a significant yet overlooked source of plastic leakage. J. Nature Communications, V 15, 2024

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insights, the Trust Protocol empowers growers to make informed decisions that are not only better for the environment but also for the long-term profitability and resilience of their farms.

Building on this foundation, the Trust Protocol recently launched a framework for its [Field Partner Program](#) pilot to formally recognize verified regenerative practices and measurable outcomes among growers. The goal is to provide brands and retailers with regenerative cotton and greater sourcing options. The pilot program, currently underway for the 2025 crop year, is designed to enhance value and benefits for brand members while providing the framework, verification, and traceability that are foundational pillars of the Trust Protocol. Additionally, the pilot will assess market demand for participating in a scalable, efficient system that provides a clear pathway for regenerative U.S. Cotton to move through the supply chain.

Brands and Retailers Embrace Verifiable Data

The Trust Protocol also provides brand and retailer members with access to third-party verified, field-level data. This can be leveraged to help them meet their own sustainability goals and navigate an increasingly complex regulatory landscape. The Trust Protocol has welcomed a growing number of globally recognized brand and retailer members, including recent additions URBN, home to brands like Anthropologie, Free People, Urban Outfitters, and Engelbert

Strauss, a leading European workwear brand.

For these companies, membership is a strategic move to advance responsible sourcing. [URBN](#) joined to gain greater transparency into its supply chain and access verified data that supports its sustainability targets. Similarly, [Engelbert Strauss](#) is leveraging the Trust Protocol to embed more responsible and ecologically friendly practices throughout its entire value chain – from the initial raw materials to the final product and beyond.

These new memberships underscore an ongoing shift in the industry as brands move beyond pledges and promises to a model of progress. The Trust Protocol’s traceability solution is central to this. It provides a flexible traceability framework that allows members to track all U.S. Cotton to its country of origin. For those sourcing Protocol Cotton – which comes from Protocol growers committed to continuous improvement and measurement – the solution links the fiber to the verified, aggregate sustainability data from the group of farms that grew it. This provides the assurance needed to make credible claims, comply with regulations like the EU’s Corporate Sustainability Reporting Directive (CSRD), and build lasting trust with stakeholders.

Case Studies in Success: Macy’s and Kiabi

The practical impact of the Trust Protocol is best illustrated through its successful

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collaborations with members. Take [Macy's, Inc.](#), for example. The iconic retailer is using its membership to accelerate its 2030 sustainability ambitions. By integrating the Trust Protocol's traceability solution, Macy's receives visibility into each stage of the production process and verified country of origin. This helps Macy's demonstrate tangible progress toward its environmental targets, ensuring that the cotton in its private-brand products is sourced with greater confidence and transparency.

Similarly, French fashion retailer [KIABI](#) is weaving sustainability directly into its business model with the help of the Trust Protocol. Its membership provides KIABI with access to verifiable data on water conservation, soil health, and reduced greenhouse gas emissions for the Protocol Cotton it sources. This allows the company to make more informed sourcing decisions and confidently communicate its commitment to responsible practices to its customers. This in turn strengthens its brand reputation and meets the growing demand for sustainable fashion.

The Power of Data: A Five-Year Milestone

The cornerstone of the Trust Protocol is its unwavering commitment to data. The program's upcoming annual report will include five years of aggregated field-

level data, an important milestone offering an unprecedented look at the collective progress of Protocol growers. This will make the Trust Protocol the first sustainable cotton fiber program to offer such a comprehensive data set, providing powerful evidence of the program's effectiveness. It will offer brands and retailers an in-depth view of the improved environmental footprint being generated at the farm level. This verifiable proof enables responsible marketing, meets stringent reporting requirements, and, most importantly, substantiates a more sustainable supply chain.

A More Responsible Cotton Future, Realized

The Trust Protocol remains committed to creating a new standard for U.S. Cotton that is data-powered, traceable by design, and generates positive impact through the global cotton value system. By aligning the needs of growers with the goals of brands and retailers, the program has created a mutually beneficial system that drives continuous, measurable improvement.

The Trust Protocol's tagline, "Trust in a smarter cotton future," is more than a promise – it's a reality. With its continued growth, the Trust Protocol proves that a more transparent and responsible cotton supply chain is possible.

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