

Soil Association Annual Conference Textiles Workshop

Audience question and panel answer session

Q1 – The situation regarding ecotextiles looks confusing, what is best ? What should be the key message, should we ban cotton?

Possibly yes! We should look at a path to a more sustainable fibre as no definition really exists. We need to remember that 90 million cotton farmers worldwide depend on us for business. It will take a long time to build up awareness of the ecotextile message.

There are many solutions and some systems are better than others. We need to banish myths, for example the myth that cotton always consumes more water. You can manage water consumption really well through water harvesting techniques. We need to also need to consider the fate of fibres like polyester when oil finally runs low. Perhaps a mixed approach is the answer.

We need to remember that organic cotton is both socially and environmentally better than any other fibre.

Q2 – There seems to be a general move towards GM cotton, is this not a good idea?

GM is not working for cotton farmers in the poorest nations where seed sellers can be very persuasive. Some GM crops are 'water saving' which could be good for farmers in drought prone areas. The organic market has had to manage on a fraction of the funds that biotech put into research. This sort of funding would be useful for demonstrating the yields possible with organic techniques, as we are sure organic is as productive as GM. Organic is a good earner for poorer farmers, but GM can reduce labour costs in the west, which you use depends on your economic circumstances.

Q3 – A recent German FT article suggests that a considerable amount of organic cotton from India has been contaminated with GM, is segregation through the chain really possible?

The German case highlights the fact that the organic versus conventional ICM argument is moral argument. Can we dictate to developing world farmers ? You can have good and bad organic farmers, so rather than forcing systems on farmers, should we not just educate them and give them the options?

How can we consider sustainability without attending to criminal over-consumption. 4-5 million t-shirts are given away (non-retail/promotional) often disposed of quickly. The DEFRA Textile Roadmap initiative doesn't look at this issue. If we deal with this perhaps we won't need GM?

Q4 – What is the future for UK wool?

The price of wool is going up with less and less going through the Wool Boards' grading and auction system. Demands and supply is all wrong in the UK, perhaps because we don't have the right breeds of sheep?

There seem to more UK fine wools available and more mixes with Camelid fibres like Alpaca.

Q5 – Should we be more honest about organic systems and their yields, should we promote this?

Organic exchange have been working on a project to measure benefits to health, diet and quality of life of over 60,000 organic cotton farmers in the developing world. Results look positive, but needs more promotion.

There are good and bad farmers in all systems, some farmers choose organic for reasons of heritage and traditional practices, others for reduced costs of inputs, some choose it to reduce pesticide use. The picture is not simple when it comes to best practice.