

Textile Exchange Stands Behind its 2014 LCA of Organic Cotton.

[Textile Exchange's 2014 Life Cycle Analysis \(LCA\) of Organic Cotton](#) that was produced in 2014 is being questioned in an opinion piece that will be published by Apparel Insider in its bi-monthly printed magazine expected to come out November 2019. In the meantime, Apparel Insider editor, Brett Matthews, has taken to social media about the upcoming article.

The overall intent of the articles written by this author (in the upcoming publication and previously in the May 2019 issue) appear to be with an agenda of creating doubt around the benefits of organic and other sustainable cotton initiatives. This is done by attempting to discredit the water-saving data that is reported in the LCA of Organic Cotton.

Textile Exchange would like to reassure our Members and stakeholders that we stand behind the data that has been collected and reported in the LCA of Organic Cotton and strongly support organic agriculture in general.

As is usual for metrics and scientific data analysis, when you do a deep dive, nothing is perfect as there are many variables and, as an industry (and in academia), we all work on this premise. As such, we approach this with best efforts and practices, data availabilities and credible third-party reviewers (in this case, [thinkstep](#) – formerly PE International), among other parameters. Textile Exchange does not find these articles to be based in fact, nor with the scientific rigor that is to be expected in an analysis, but rather they are opinion-pieces. Therefore, we will not participate in a debate with the author or Apparel Insider. Textile Exchange has spent countless hours over an eight-month period answering questions and inviting the author to lend her insights as an active member of a wider group of cotton sustainability stakeholders developing ongoing research focusing on data collection for key performance indicators – these invites have gone unanswered. It is clear that this is not the author's objective.

At Apparel Insider's request, we have also sent a [fact-finding document](#) as support listing various studies to give a balanced (and scientifically sound) analysis to this article. The editor had originally said, "If you have any independent data/analysis that contradicts/clarifies/modifies [the author] assertions, please send it immediately, and [the author] would be happy to incorporate it into her analysis." We did so in good faith and see that, so far, this has not, in fact, been the case.

As a non-profit organization, our limited resources are better spent on projects where we can influence positive change and collaborate effectively without bias and within a scientifically sound framework.

Background to Present Day

In 2014, Textile Exchange commissioned the LCA of Organic Cotton to be developed by thinkstep (formerly PE International and now part of Sphera), the same consultancy company that has prepared LCA's for other cotton-based growing systems using the same methodology and software modeling. The LCA of Organic Cotton has and continues to enable companies to use the best available data to date to quantify improvements in their sustainability journey.

LCAs provide a snapshot of a select number of environmental impacts, including greenhouse gas emissions, water and energy use. LCAs in agriculture are influenced by climatic and regional variations. These influencers can fluctuate from year to year, particularly the weather, and can significantly influence growing conditions and yields. The data on water that is being questioned was collected using a sample from every organic cotton production region and aggregated it to calculate a global average. (Note: this is the same methodology applied to other cotton focused LCAs.)

Textile Exchange believes that this LCA is a useful tool in identifying the benefits of organic farming, which include greater water savings than other cotton production systems because it creates healthier soil, which retains moisture better, and is reflected in the water savings ([BioScience](#)). Factors that influence water data include the use of irrigation and the type of irrigation system in use, or whether the farm is rainfed (dry-land). The significance of the water data is also not just about the volume of water, but toxicity loading as well. Organic cotton production not only saves water, when compared to chemically produced cotton, but it also ensures that water systems remain free of toxic and persistent chemical inputs.

LCAs provide indicators and measurements in a few specific areas. They do not measure other factors that show the full benefits of one fiber over the other, such as biodiversity, microbial activity in the soil, crop rotation and food security impacts, or the toxicity risks to human life and the environment. In response to the sensationalized headlines that Apparel Insider is using to garner readership on this article, La Rhea Pepper, Textile Exchange's Managing Director, said, "I didn't become an organic cotton farmer because of data. I did it because of principles! It is a matter of principle that our fields and farms should be safe places to live and play.

It's a matter of principle that cotton farmers shouldn't die of cancer caused by agrochemicals, as my husband and his father did.

It's a matter of principle that cotton farmers should be able to farm without getting locked into a cycle of debt and despair by the cost of seeds that can't be reused and chemicals that need to be used more intensively as the soil degrades.

It's a matter of principle that every kilogram and pound of toxic and persistent chemical fertilizers and pesticides that we can stop going into the soil is a gift to my grandchildren's future.

It's a matter of principle that farmers should be able to join together and farm cooperatively, rather than be subservient to chemical agriculture with its interest-bearing loans and financial restrictions.

Organic production systems are part of a proactive solution to the bigger issues that we are facing – preservation of life in our soils, protection and restoration of bio-diversity, shifting from a mono-crop culture to rotation crops to support soil and food security issues...and this is only the beginning of the benefits.

Organic and Regenerative agricultural practices are a direction of travel. To continue promoting and supporting chemically intensive agriculture is no longer acceptable.

'All truth passes through three stages. First, it is ridiculed. Second, it is violently opposed. Third, it is accepted as being self-evident.'

Arthur Schopenhauer

As an organic cotton farmer – I have been laughed at and cussed at over the years. And now, by more and more people, I have acceptance. The closer we get to changing the system, the more the system fights back, and I think that's what we're seeing here.

Sowing doubts about 'the data' kept big tobacco in its lethal business for many years, and we have learned that the oil companies used the same techniques to question climate science and hold back the changes we now know we need to make. In the offices of chemical agriculture, they will be very pleased to see the same thing emerging in cotton.

LCAs represent a snapshot in time. The data we're utilizing supports a direction of travel, and there are other studies that support organic production systems as a solution to current challenges. So by all means question the data but realize whose interests you are serving by doing so. And if you want to question my principles - well, I suggest you consider what lies behind them before we get into that discussion."

Textile Exchange's 2014 LCA of Organic Cotton, was conducted with the time, resources, and data that was available at the time, which is clearly called out in the report. Regardless of these limitations, Textile Exchange believes that the LCA of Organic Cotton remains an important tool for the industry and we stand behind the data that has been collected and reported.

Textile Exchange recognizes that there are opportunities for the industry as a whole to invest more broadly in improved data and measurement systems regarding the impacts of fibers and materials, as well as, of various production systems. Many organizations in the industry have recently made strong commitments to sourcing more sustainable fibers, to achieving Science Based Targets, and more. Textile Exchange itself recently announced our new [2030 Strategy: Climate+](#) that prioritizes urgent action on the climate impacts of textile fiber and material production. In order for all of us to successfully meet our goals, it is critical that we have access to the right data to make good decisions, as well as, to the systems that allow us to monitor our progress over time. Textile Exchange will continue to advocate for improved data and systems as part of our 2030 Strategy: Climate+.

Questions? Please contact [Textile Exchange Communications](#).