Textile Exchange response to Apparel Insider opinion piece attempting to discredit the LCA of Organic Cotton.

Sent to Brett Matthews, Editor of Apparel Insider by his deadline of Oct. 30, 2019

Thank you for sharing this information with us for comment. As you may know, our organic cotton LCA data is the best publicly available LCA to date. 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, among other parameters and we stand by our work and strongly support organic agriculture in general. Rather than sharing more studies and stakeholder POVs which will give a more balanced view and scientific rigor to her piece, we would like to offer another invitation to Ms. Veronica Cassatly to work with Textile Exchange in order to contribute her expertise and time in ways that can result in updated tools and data for a rapidly growing industry. Our philosophy is that it is always a good rule of thumb to offer an alternative solution to a topic that one is taking to task. In the interim we would like to share the following information and fact-finding to compliment the piece and so that this information can be reflected appropriately.

The following statement may be printed alongside the information from Ms. Cassatly:

As noted in previous responses, Textile Exchange commissioned thinkstep – an independent, neutral party that has prepared numerous (Life Cycle Assessments) LCAs, including for Cotton Incorporated – to develop an LCA addressing key aspects of organic cotton production earlier.

This LCA was developed by the same company and using the same methodology as a previous and unchallenged LCA from Cotton Inc., and thus enabled companies to use the best available data to quantify improvements in their sustainability journey. The LCA provides a snapshot of specific impacts, in this case global warming, acidification and eutrophication potential, as well as energy and water use. Textile Exchange believes that this LCA is a useful tool in identifying the benefits of organic farming for the industry.

We do not agree with Ms. Cassatly’s statement that there is “no data to substantiate claims that at a global level, one type of cotton is more sustainable than another. They are all equally unsustainable.”

Not only does the LCA include substantial evidence of the benefits of organic production, but, as Dr. Jessica Shade, Director of Science Programs at The Organic Center points out, there is considerable scientific data demonstrating that organic systems set a high standard when it comes to sustainable agricultural production practices.

She notes, for example:

A study published in Renewable Agriculture and Food Systems found that by avoiding synthetic fertilizer, organic production is able to reduce emissions by 20%. Another study, published in
BioScience, found that organic production results in “higher soil organic matter and nitrogen, lower fossil energy inputs, yields similar to those of conventional systems, and conservation of soil moisture and water resources (especially advantageous under drought conditions).” Organic farming also contributes to climate change mitigation by sequestering carbon in the soil. Studies show that the diverse crop rotation strategies and soil-building practices required by USDA’s National Organic Program for all certified organic farmers increase soil organic carbon leading to increased long-term carbon storage.

Organic production system are built on the tenants of sustainability and regenerative practices. Reuse is a key component of sustainability, but when new material is produced, manufactured, and processed it should be done in a manner that does not contribute to environmental degradation. Organic production addresses this by using fewer synthetic inputs, such as synthetic nitrogen and toxic pesticides.

Finally, a large body of literature suggests that organic farming systems can play a role in biodiversity conservation. Common organic farming practices benefit a wide range of organisms. Compared to conventional farms, organic farms generally support a greater diversity of carabid beetles, spiders, earthworms, beneficial parasitoids, vascular plants, birds, bees and other native pollinators, soil microbes and fungi, and small rodents.

Textile Exchange agrees with Ms. Cassatly that “the solution is for us all to buy less, buy better, and wear it more.” However, the focus of our LCA was specifically on fiber production as cotton will continue to be a beloved fiber, and sustainable agriculture must play an ever-greater role in all 17 of the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals.

We hope this information helps with her continued analysis in this area. And finally, we hope that Ms. Cassatly accepts our invitation to join with Textile Exchange and 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. We understand that we are coming from complementary perspectives and working together will enable us all to move not only the conversation forward but also to use resources to drive transformational change in the industry.