

Sportswear and Sustainability are the forward drivers of Wool

A renewed sense of confidence in wool marked the 84th Annual Congress of the International Wool Textile Organisation (IWTO), held 18-20 May in Zhangjiagang, China, a key hub of early stage wool processing in the Jiangsu Province.



Altogether more than 421 delegates from 22 countries and 268 companies and organisations attended the event, a highlight in the annual calendar of the wool textile industry.

Standout sessions included the Wool Retail Forum, created with the support of The Woolmark Company, where Craig Vanderoef, Senior Director at Adidas, Germany dazzled delegates with his enthusiasm for the use of wool in sports performance apparel.

A true advocate of the fibre, Vanderoef's presentation lauded wool's performance qualities, including breathability, durability, and the ability to resist water without added finishes. In technical terms, Vanderoef said, "We have spent 60 years trying to create something that already existed."

Outdoor and sports apparel is one of the fastest-growing markets for wool. Many delegates expressed the hope that the trend towards inclusion of wool in sports apparel would raise awareness in consumers about the positive attributes of wool, possibly causing a knock-on trend towards the increased use of wool in other apparel markets.

Along with performance, the industry is also looking to provenance as a way in which consumers can connect with wool.

Also known as "ingredient branding," provenance refers to the origin of a fabric, with trusted fabric makers providing "certain assurances of quality," as IWTO President Peter Ackroyd explained. Emphasizing that provenance does not mean total traceability - it is "where the fabric comes from, not the sheep" - Ackroyd pointed to British fabric makers Harris Tweed and Abraham Moon and Italian weaver E Thomas as examples of how recognised brands of fabric imbue a finished product with legitimacy. "Retailers today require an inordinate number of questions to be answered by suppliers on matters relating to corporate social responsibility, environmental excellence, provenance and performance," he added and "The wool pipeline has invested time, effort and resources into answering these questions, and has consequently seen a shift in the perception of wool in the global marketplace."

Provenance is also viewed by the wool textile industry as an antidote to fast fashion, a trend which has seen wool yarns and fabric pushed aside in favour of cheap, petro-chemical based fibres.

Not only has this practice had a severe effect on wool-growing communities around the world, it has encouraged vast amounts of waste as fast fashion garments have short lifespans and soon end up in landfills. In contrast, a wool garment, made of quality fibre and designed to last, will be worn for years and afterwards is a valuable recyclable, that when the time comes will readily biodegrade.

As an industry that depends on natural resources, including plant and animal life, there is a duty to manage resources in a sustainable way. As noted by Peter Ackroyd in his opening address, brands and retailers are continuing to seek assurances that wool products are, at a minimum, harmless.

Sustainability has, in other words, become market-driven. "It is an issue we cannot escape from," said Dr Paul Swan, General Manager, Research at Australian Wool Innovation. "It is not so much what we think about sustainability, as what the market thinks of us."

With brands looking for what he termed "enhanced provenance assurance," reflecting a desire for authenticity especially in the luxury end use, it is crucial that the industry provide answers and support.

The brands are motivated by consumers who are looking to them for leadership on these issues. Dr Swan urged the industry to continue to invest in this area, notably in Life Cycle Assessment (LCA) case studies, which allows the industry to build a body of technical evidence in support of wool. Existing wool LCAs suffer from misconceptions and methodologies which can create a needlessly negative – not to mention erroneous – image of wool.

Dave Maslen, Global Partnerships Manager at The New Zealand Merino Company agreed. Asked about the consumer's perception of the wool industry's environmental credentials, Maslen responded that wool is currently on trend and has a relatively strong perception in the eye of the consumer as something that is natural. And he added: "This is a strong indicator for me that as an industry we need to be working on this."

Delegates praised Maslen's presentation of results from research into greenhouse gases, energy use and water use for wool products such as a sweater or pair of socks.

Delegates welcomed a presentation by Queensland University Professor Beverley Henry on biodiversity and its impact on sheep and wool. This is an issue which has had comparatively less exposure than other environmental topics such as Life Cycle Assessment, but is predicted to play an increasing role in corporate social responsibility targets, as concerns about land demand, food security and climate change are issues which are in front of consumers daily.

There is in fact pressure on LCA scientists to include biodiversity in LCA assessments, said Professor Henry. Potentially a very good way to talk about wool's positive impact, the industry needs to find a way to take wool's biodiversity stories to the public.

One audience with the potential to be receptive to such messages is the increasingly savvy and environmentally conscious Chinese domestic market.

As a niche fibre, wool's main consumer audience has long been identified as the LOHAS consumer. These are individuals who value sustainability, a healthy lifestyle, and who are willing to pay for products reflecting these attributes.

Increasing numbers of Chinese consumers are expected to enter this category, says Pierre Dupond, General Manager of the Full Price Division at Glamour Sales China, China's largest online retailer, in his presentation on consumer trends in the world's largest wool consuming country.

This new evolution of Chinese consumer is no longer satisfied with a big name on a label, but is looking for limited materials presented sustainably and with a unique aspect – a profile that fits perfectly with wool.

Already half of Australia's raw wool clip is consumed in China at retail level. With consumer income the most important factor for driving wool consumption according to Chris Wilcox, leading global wool industry analyst and Executive Director of the National Council of Wool Selling Brokers of Australia, the Chinese domestic market will be one to watch, as Chinese domestic consumption begins to play a larger role in the Chinese economy.

Co-organised by IWTO member China Wool Textile Association (CWTA), this was the fourth IWTO Congress to take place in China, the world's largest wool processing and wool consuming country.

Carrying forward the theme of the future of wool textiles, the 85th IWTO Congress will focus on wool for future generations, and is scheduled for April 4 -6, 2016 in Sydney, Australia. Co-hosted by one of IWTO's most engaged members, the Federation of Australian Wool Organisation (FAWO) aims to attract more than 400 key players from the global wool industry. Home to approximately 71 million sheep, Australia is the world's leading producer of wool.

The IWTO Congress is a key platform for the global wool textile trade to meet, exchange ideas and formulate industry policy. Congress participants include growers, traders, primary processors, spinners, weavers and garment manufacturers, together with retailers and other organisations involved in the wool pipeline.

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