

A Fibre for All Generations: From Baby Boomers to Generation Z, Trends Point the Way to Wool's Future at the 85th IWTO Congress

BRUSSELS, 19 MAY 2016 - Opportunities for wool exist where they never have before – this was the ultimate take-home message from the 85th IWTO Congress, the annual conference of the wool textile industry.

Stand-out sessions from among the more than 30 featured speakers emphasized the role of Generations Y and Z in creating demand for wool, as well as an often overlooked demographic: empty-nesters with the power to spend.



Co-hosted by the Federation of Australian Wool Organisations (FAWO), more than 420 delegates from 25 countries attended the three-day event, held 4-6 April in Sydney, Australia.

Featured speakers included Craig Vanderoef, Senior Director at adidas, Germany and Phil Dickinson, Founder and Creative Director of Some Ideas, UK, both back by popular demand, along with Ermenegildo Zegna CEO Paolo Zegna, Parlour X Founder/Owner Eva Galambos and Emerald Group CBDO Melinda O'Rourke who joined Australian fashion journalist Mitchell Oakley-Smith for the latest installation of the Woolmark-led Retail Forum on the last day of the Congress.

'The intermix of supply, demand, upstream and downstream has been perfect,' IWTO President Peter Ackroyd said of the Congress in his closing remarks (pictured left). 'We've had a very enriching few days. We see opportunities for our fibre where I never thought there would be.'



Generations Y & Z: Show Them the When and Why

Befitting the Congress theme of 'Wool for Future Generations', 20 young wool professionals, more than double the number of previous years, joined the event as part of IWTO's Young Professionals Programme.

This group fit squarely within speaker Craig Vanderoef's definition of Generation Y or 'Millennials', tech savvy multiculturalists who will make up 75% of the global workforce by

2025.

They and their siblings in Generation Z – currently influencing US\$600 billion in parental spending – are key to growing the next generation of wool consumers.

‘They need us, we need them,’ Mr Vanderoef said, emphasising that whatever wool’s perceived issues, the ‘big win’ for the industry will be to solve for future generations the ‘when and why’ of wearing wool.

He urged the delegates present, as ‘architects’ of wool, to replace negative perceptions with positive ones, citing the athleisure sector as an example of how wool’s natural performance characteristics – odour resistance, breathability, handle, thermal comfort – go hand in hand with fashionable fitness.

'Discretionary Spenders' May Lead Wool Revival

At the other end of the demographic spectrum is the mature consumer – those aged 40-60+, encompassing both Generation X and the Baby Boomers in traditional wool consumer strongholds like the UK, US, Germany and Japan, although the ageing populations in China and South Korea should also be taken seriously, said Dr Clint Laurent, CEO of Global Demographics Ltd and an authority on interpreting the impact of global demographic change.

The mature consumer invests in premium clothing and has a keen interest in health and wellbeing, Dr Laurent said. With little debt, this consumer group’s discretionary spending power is increasing, and while they may be buying less they are buying ‘better’. This increasing spending power is ‘a steamroller coming in,’ that the wool industry cannot afford to ignore, Dr Laurent added.

Sustainability Showcases Progress

Transcending age differences, from sportswear to suits, wool’s eco-credentials are also key to future demand.

The IWTO Sustainable Practices Working Group meeting, open to all IWTO members, showcased the progress made on improving life cycle assessment (LCA) for wool. Wool LCAs feed into environmental rating systems.

Led by Sustainable Practices Working Group Chair Dr Paul Swan of AWI, work is currently focused on garment use and post-consumer reuse and recycling. Wool makes up about 1.4% of the market for apparel textiles but 5% of recycled clothing is wool, said Dr Swan.

Professor Beverley Henry of Queensland University of Technology, chair of the working group’s LCA TAG, showed how new methods for conducting wool LCAs on farm provide increased consistency and more accurate metrics for wool.

A new allocation method for co-producing farms, for example, reduces the carbon footprint of wool’s on-farm stage by 35%. This new allocation method is being adopted by organisations, Prof Henry said, but work is still to be done on the use and recycling phases.

NZ Merino’s Dave Maslen, also a member of the working group’s LCA TAG, shared recent compelling research from New Zealand on the use phase that shows wool garments are worn more often, last longer and are washed less often than those made of other fibres.

With this new data, said Mr Maslen, the wool LCA can be remodelled and again lead to improvements in wool’s environmental footprint.

Australian Fashion Diplomacy

The Congress was officially opened by Australian Minister for Foreign Affairs Julie Bishop who cited cool wool technology as an example of innovative change brought to the global fashion market by contemporary wool textiles.

Wool's 'fashion diplomacy' she said is 'essential to Australia's reputation as a contemporary economy'.

Home to some 71 million sheep, the majority of which are Merino, Australia produces 23% of the world's wool and is the world's largest wool producer and exporter. More than 80% of the world's apparel wool comes from Australia, and 90% of that which is used for next-to-skin apparel, e.g. less than 19.5 microns.

Most of Australia's wool farms continue to be family owned and operated, supporting 50,000 farmers and their communities, as well as tens of thousands in the industry.

HRH The Prince of Wales to Host Wool Conference in Scotland

Wishing delegates a successful Congress in a pre-recorded video, HRH The Prince of Wales, Patron of the Campaign for Wool, spoke of wool's many natural advantages and the great progress being made in the industry to promote wool products.

Noting however that work was yet to be done to spread the message of wool's environmental advantages, Prince Charles announced he would host leading figures from the world of wool and retail at his inaugural 'Davos of Wool' wool conference at Dumfries House in Scotland later this year.

The emphasis, he said, would be to examine 'the economics of this natural fibre as a global natural resource.'



Paolo Zegna at the Retail Forum



Peter Ackroyd congratulates outgoing Secretary General Elisabeth van Delden



The first ever IWTO Congress wool auction offered nearly 15,500 bales



Growing the next generation of wool - Craig Vanderoef

A highlight of the wool textile industry calendar, the IWTO Congress unites wool growers, brokers, exporters, processors, spinners, weavers, garment manufacturers, designers and retailers each year with an extensive programme of speakers and business networking.

This year's programme highlighted the many achievements of the Australian wool industry along with innovations in the supply chain both on-farm and in processing. A selection of presentations will be released on IWTO's new podcast, Planet Wool, from June 2016.

For a full list of speakers and topics, view the Congress programme [here](#).

The 86th Congress will be held 15-17 May 2017 in Istanbul, Turkey. For more information, visit iwto.org/events/upcoming-events/.

About IWTO

With a membership comprised of 60% of total wool production world-wide, encompassing the wool pipeline from sheep to shop, the International Wool Textile Organisation represents the interests of the wool textile trade at the global level. By facilitating industry strategy and ensuring standards in manufacturing and sustainability, IWTO fosters connection between members and all stakeholders through mutual support of opportunities for wool. To learn more about IWTO and its activities, visit www.iwto.org.



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