REVIEW HIGHLIGHTS FAULTS IN APPAREL SUSTAINABILITY RATING SYSTEM

BRUSSELS, 2 APRIL 2019 – A review of a leading environmental impact tool for apparel finds that unless improvements are made, weaknesses in the underlying science could lead to misleading results, with potentially far-reaching consequences for the environment.

Sustainability ratings systems are intended to help measure and minimise environmental impacts. But they could very well have the opposite result, analysts warn.

Researchers Dr Stephen Wiedemann and Dr Kalinda Watson of Integrity AG & Environment in Queensland, Australia, in a study funded by Australian Wool Innovation, performed a comprehensive analysis of the Sustainable Apparel Coalition's Material Sustainability Index (MSI), a product-focused tool that compares the sustainability of different textile materials.

Brands, retailers, and government initiatives are likely to rely on sustainability ratings systems like the MSI when making sustainability choices. Consequently, this information has the potential to influence decisions ranging from apparel design and product lines to environmental policy and eco-labelling schemes.

Unless these key issues are addressed, the guidance provided could lead to unsustainable choices, compromising the very thing environmental rating tools like the MSI set out to do.

We Can't Afford to Get It Wrong

The fashion industry is responsible for 8% of global climate change, according to recent reports.

"It is essential that the textile industry continue to improve its sustainability," says Dr Wiedemann.

"We need robust, accurate and reliable methods to generate meaningful ratings that can be trusted by all parts of the supply chain, including consumers.

"This review is intended as a constructive contribution. Most of the issues we found can be addressed by adhering to International Standards and guidelines for best practice in LCA. The result would be a stronger tool that would be more likely to improve the sustainability performance of the global apparel and footwear industry."

Key Recommendations

1. *The MSI needs to include the full life cycle of products.*

Currently, two main parts of the life cycle are excluded: the use phase and end of life.

The period of use – of active wear and care of a garment – is generally the highest impact stage.

How different types and kinds of clothing are cared for and the length of time they are used is known to vary significantly depending on purpose and fibre content.

Without assessing these factors, it is impossible to correctly understand the impacts from different clothing. It is also impossible to combat the problem of fast fashion if the amount of time a garment is used for is not taken into account.

2. *Include important impacts – for example microfibres.*

Growing evidence of the significant environmental impacts of microplastics are coming to light, yet this important impact is currently left out of the MSI's scoring. While ever this remains a gap, the scores are unbalanced.

One of the top three causes of microplastics pollution is shedding from synthetic clothing. Any robust assessment of environmental impacts to textiles must include microplastics.

While the science for measuring microplastics is still being developed, an interim accounting system could be implemented.

3. *Improve the underlying data.*

The reviewers found that the quality of data in the MSI was, in many instances, poor.

It is common practice in LCA – and other fields of science – to report the scientific confidence in the results, indicating whether the differences are meaningful or just "noise". But this has not been done in the MSI and urgently needs to be rectified, along with improving underlying data quality.

4. *Improve Transparency.*

Overall, the MSI lacks transparency in its use of proxy data and in description of its methods – a lack which weakens the tool's credibility.

Proxy data from limited sources is used for many fibre types, meaning the assessments are assumption heavy. As there is no measure of the uncertainty of the results, it is impossible to know how influential these many assumptions are for the results.

Another lack of transparency lies in the MSI's scoring methods. The MSI combines environmental impacts into a single "score" by applying different weightings to energy, water, greenhouse gases, etc. There is no agreed scientific way to say which of these is more important, hence value judgements have been made to derive the MSI score.

The "raw" information that leads to the score should be, as a matter of good practice, reported along with the score.

5. *Don't Stop with LCA.*

LCA based results currently reflect only a part of the environmental impacts of a product. Renewability, biodegradability, carbon cycling and biodiversity are all aspects which, although difficult

to integrate into LCA, are part of the equation and need to be considered in a comprehensive environmental measurement.

Wool Supports a Sustainable Future

Naturally renewable, biodegradable, readily recycled, with low-cost of care, wool is a highly prized apparel fibre.

In its support of the wellbeing of the planet and its people, the wool industry supports a robust and scientifically defendable approach to environmental assessments in the textile industry.

The wool industry has been and continues to be an active contributor to the processes such as the Sustainable Apparel Coalition, and to the funding of much-needed research.

About IWTO

With a worldwide membership encompassing the wool pipeline from farm to retail, the IWTO represents the interests of the global wool trade. By facilitating research and development and maintaining textile industry standards, IWTO ensures a sustainable future for wool. To learn more about IWTO and its activities, visit www.iwto.org.

Media Contact:
Jeannette Cook
Communications Manager
Tel.: +32 2 505 4012
Email: media@iwto.org