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Wool Integrity
Countering counterintuitive ratings and embracing regeneration, wool sets a course for long-term credibility

"None of the other fibres are telling their whole cradle to grave story. I say, Wool is as good as it gets”
– IWTO President Peter Ackroyd

BRUSSELS, 18 DECEMBER 2017 – With the price of Merino at record highs, IWTO held its annual Wool Round Table 7-8 December in Port Elizabeth, South Africa, hub of the country’s wool and mohair industry.

Wool hovers at just over 1% of the world’s total fibre production, but the wool message remains strong: throwaway culture is on its way out, and with the weight of both science and common sense around it, the wool industry is primed with the facts that support its sustainability and integrity.

“We are swamped by the thing that will end up in landfill,” said IWTO President Peter Ackroyd in his opening remarks – and, as a later presentation attested, in our drinking water. “But with scientific correctness we can counter the arguments against wool.”
“Wool is often unfairly classified by powerful organisations promoting petroleum based fibres that do not (strategically) measure performance on a cradle to grave basis,” Mr Ackroyd further noted. He urged the industry to speak with conviction supported by the science in which the industry has been investing – an investment that is being returned in spades.

**Countering the Counterintuitive**

Since sustainability ratings have come into vogue in the past decade, wool has seen itself and other natural fibres ranked below synthetic fibres such as polyester, acrylic, and nylon. It’s a counterintuitive outcome that leaves many (just one example) scratching heads.

One big reason for the low rankings is oversimplification – ratings specialists want to come up with a single score, and in so doing make subjective weightings to environmental impact assessments such as land use and eutrophication.

Land use probably causes the most head scratching among farmers, and anyone who understands agriculture. Simply put, wool sheep are run on land that does not support more lucrative crops.

“To penalize wool for land use when it is probably the best use of the land does not make sense,” said Geoff Kingwill, former Chair of Cape Wools SA, now Chair of IWTO’s Sustainable Practices Working Group. The oversimplification of farm practices, he says, is misleading and steers consumers in the wrong direction.

**What the Ratings Leave Out**

Equally irksome is what the ratings fail to consider.

Often, charts are presented that fail to consider the complete life of wool products. A recent fashion textile report, for example, compared fibres on the “materials” phase, or production phase, only. For wool this means up to the farm gate, where about 80% of wool’s environmental impacts occur. Far fewer impacts occur later in the life of a wool product – wool garments need to be laundered less frequently than those of other fibres, and there is evidence that wool products are used for longer than their less-natural counterparts.

Comparisons that fail to take the full life span into account are therefore skewed. But this is difficult to explain on a swing tag, the Round Table presenters made clear.

Astonishing, too, is the news that microfibres – those invisible bits of plastic that have now entered the planet’s food chain – are not included in the data that leads to the ratings scores.

This is one of the most pressing environmental problems the planet is currently facing, and it must be considered, said LCA expert Dr Beverley Henry. “The environmental footprint score should include all significant impacts. Land use, biodiversity, microplastics – we may not have the methods, but they must be considered.”

**Sustainability is the Bridge, Regeneration is the Destination**

Speaker Chris Kerston of the Savory Institute agreed that modelling the LCA (life cycle assessment) does not always capture the full impact and not all systems are created equal.
The brands in the Savory Institute’s new Land 2 Market Programme are in fact moving beyond sustainability to regeneration.

Wool is regenerative: “It is really behind us, this story – because what story is there to oil? There’s no story to oil.” Chris Kerston, Savory Institute

“Net zero is not going to save humanity,” said Mr Kerston. Brands in the L2M are looking for a “differentiated product” that shows net positive results on land.

“Sustainability is the bridge, regeneration is the destination,” Mr Kerston stated.

Echoing the importance of land regeneration, Rolf Pretorius Chair of the Olive Leaf Foundation said, “We must regenerate the land. In rural areas the land degradation has an immediate effect.” But it doesn’t stop there. “The demise of the rural will also cause issues in town and cities. That’s a value we have to see.”

Retail is moving in a similar direction. Feroz Koor, Head of Sustainability at Woolworths, reported that the South African-based multinational (of which David Jones and Country Road Group are a part) is moving beyond efficiency into stewardship – not only must products not be harmful, they must also provide a benefit.

Wool Integrity – On Farm and Off

Communicating the benefits of wool sheep may have its challenges: “urban disconnect” requires educating consumers about the provenance of wool products and why this matters. The industry’s increasing transparency may prove helpful: presentations on wool declarations showed that wool
growers are increasingly reporting on-farm practices such as mulesing. Through certification processes in both Australia and South Africa, this information is passed along through the supply chain, providing confidence to those choosing wool.

In Australia, where declarations are voluntary, the declaration rate is up to 65% and in some states even higher.

In South Africa such declarations are compulsory.

One Man’s Merino Challenge

As for the benefits of wool products themselves, Dr Cobus Oosthuizen of LifeXChange left no doubt. Challenged to put his life-changing mentoring theories to the test, Cobus undertook to run an extreme marathon in the South African desert, wearing a Core Merino t-shirt.

Scrutinizing the claims that are made about wool, such as breathability, softness, odour resistance – these and more unique properties of wool here – Dr Oosthuizen took it as his mission “to see if what you claim holds any integrity.” The outcome?

He gave wool 10 out of 10.

“It was the most amazing product to experience and to run with,” was the conclusion. He told participants, “If there is one product that shows integrity, and one industry that shows integrity … that is you guys.”

Cobus Oosthuizen of LifeXChange on running the Kalahari Augrabies Extreme Marathon in a wool base layer: “the most amazing product to experience and to run with”
Wool for Future Markets: IWTO Congress in Hong Kong, May 2018

Join IWTO and the wool textile industry in Hong Kong for the annual Congress, 14-16 May 2018. The programme will focus on Wool for Future Markets. Event details along with the latest news on wool’s sustainability, health benefits, and more on www.iwto.org.

Merinos graze at the Robertskraal Ranch in the Eastern Cape Province of South Africa known for its lush savannah pastures high in nutritional value. The pastures support Merino sheep, Angora goats and 22 species of game.

About IWTO

With a worldwide membership encompassing the wool pipeline from farm to retail, the IWTO represents the interests of the wool textile trade at a global level. The recognized authority for standards in the industry, IWTO facilitates research, education and knowledge sharing in its mission to ensure 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

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