



Textile Exchange Organic Cotton Round Table

Briefing 1

Briefing Document: Seed Availability

The availability of non GM (genetically modified) seed for organic cultivation is one of the foremost issues for the organic industry as a whole. GM cotton is dominant in countries such as the USA (95%) and India (85-90%) which in turn has led to an increased risk of organic cotton being contaminated, and has reduced biodiversity. More countries, particularly in Africa, are trialling GM cotton and preparing for its introduction.

What are the challenges?

Although availability of non GM seed is of primary concern to the farmers, it obviously affects the entire supply chain. Without an adequate supply of appropriate, good quality seed suitable for organic cotton growing conditions, the entire sector suffers. Non GM seed is also required to meet Fairtrade and Cotton made in Africa (CmiA) production standards, as well as organic.

Specific challenges are evident at all stages of the supply chain.

Farmers

- Lack of available seed suitable for organic and low input farming, in a number of organic cotton producing countries; particularly India and Burkina Faso, due to prevalence of GM.
- In India, for example, almost all cotton seed is hybridised and genetically modified. Hybrid/GM seed performs better under high-input conditions (requiring plenty of fertiliser, water, herbicides). Indian organic farmers say that:
 - Poor germination rates are a major issue (reports of 70-75%, against required rate of 90-95%).
 - Organic production can lead to a yield gap of approx 20% vis-a-vis conventional cotton.
- Subsidies can be found for purchasing GM seeds but there are no matching incentives for organic.

Supply Chain Partners

- Majority of seed company investment (R&D) goes into improvements for processing, such as fiber strength and spinning quality etc. Usually combined with GM seed development.
- Challenges exist in the integrity of traceability after the ginning stage, and assuring no contamination.
- Concerned that organic fiber they are using is not genuine.

Brands and Retailers

- A growing awareness of scarcity and security of supply.
- Concerned that organic cotton in their supply chain should be GM free - what they are buying is what they get.
- Want to ensure that reputation of company is not impacted negatively.

How can we overcome these challenges? Thought starters

- Advocate for seed companies to engage in seed development suitable for organic and low input farming.
- Support work on organic seed development programmes with farm groups.
- Engage in value chain training and traceability to help address issues of contamination.