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Cotton Producers Deserve Recognition In Apparel Industry

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United States cotton production always has been underappreciated in the global textile apparel industry, according to Dr. Jung Ha-Brookshire, assistant professor in the Department of Textile Apparel Management at the University of Missouri, who spoke at the Missouri Cotton Production & Outlook Conference at Portageville, Mo.

“We are the third largest cotton producing country in the world, yet we don’t produce cotton apparel in this country,” she noted. “Instead most of the cotton fibers are exported out to other countries such as China, Bangladesh, Pakistan, Mexico and so forth. Those countries import U.S. cotton fibers and then process them into yarns and fabrics and apparel. We export it back to this country, to the United States for U.S. consumption.”

However, when the apparel comes back to the United States, it generally has “Made in China,” “Made in Mexico,” “Made in Pakistan” labels. Current country of origin rules in the United States define the country of origin as the country in which the last substantial transformation took place, regardless of the fiber or other critical raw material origin. Due to this rule, often, the contribution of American farmers has been lost in the midst of the global supply chain of cotton apparel.

“That has been a concern of mine,” Ha-brownshire said. “We have the information, we have the technology to keep the integrity of U.S. cotton; yet somehow the retailers, the brand managers and especially the policy makers, we just never have motivated enough of them to recognize the components that the United States is producing. That could be cotton fibers, that could be cotton yarn products, that could be also brand creators in this country as well as design, branders, product developers, and so forth. So it’s just one small step for me to start recognizing what we do as manufacturers or

producers of raw materials in this country.

“I’ve been telling retailers and brand owners ‘Why don’t you consider labeling certain of your products as ‘Made in China with U.S. cotton,’ or ‘Made in Mexico with U.S. cotton?’ It shouldn’t be that difficult for you to track that and communicate that to your consumers. According to my recent research, American consumers are willing to pay up to 15 percent more for a product made with U.S. cotton than what they pay for other products that may not be made with U.S. components. Consumers appreciate it, and the technology and information is there. I think we need to start recognizing what we do here by more clearly communicating with our consumers; that would help also this current ‘Buy America’ drive in our country. Everything doesn’t have to be made here for it to garner respect from American consumers, to contribute to the American economy. Just producing cotton alone can make a huge contribution to cotton apparel even though sewing was not done in this country.”

Because of the labor issue, the clothing may not be 100 percent made in this country. The fiber might have come from this country, the fabric might have come from this country, design and brand might have originated in this country. Yet, U.S. consumers need to know what is from the United States.

“We do one of the most important things for human mankind, providing fundamental natural fibers that everyone in this world needs,” she said. “So the final take home message is that without cotton farmers we can’t enjoy all this clothing that we have everyday. And what you do everyday is really very important for fundamental human survival as well as sustainability; if you do it well, responsibly and sustainably that will eventually help the entire society and the world. Because you do that, I’m going to retailers and brand owners to ask them to recognize what you contribute to our clothing.” Δ

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