

# Getting to GOTS

From Oeko-Tex 100 to the Eco-label, when it comes to the certification of ecotextile products, there is no shortage of standards to choose from, says Lee Holdstock of The Soil Association.

If it's purely organic textile standards that you're interested in, then there are more than enough to choose from. Although this wide range of standards and certification offers choice, a certain amount of confusion is inevitable, leaving brand holders and manufacturers feeling unsure which standard they should be assessed against.

The first question often asked by those considering marketing organic textiles is 'do I legally have to have certification'. The short answer in the EU is no. Although an EU regulation (EN2092) for farming and processing of organic food products has existed since 1991, it has never been extended to cover organic non-food products. The situation in the US is slightly different with the USDA insisting that even non-food organic products are at least farmed in line with the 'National Organic Program'. In common with the EU and much of the rest of the world, the processing of organic textiles in the US remains unregulated.

In the absence of any statutory organic standards for textile processing, organic standard setting organisations have historically been left to their own private initiatives. Many standards have followed frameworks outlined by international accreditation organisations such as IFOAM who specialise in developing 'standards for standards'. Other standards have been either influenced by existing food processing standards, or developed totally independently. Reassuringly, most of the certifiers who apply these standards have their competence verified by third party accreditation organisations under ISO or government guidelines.

Although certification to these 'private' standards is entirely voluntary, many companies still consider it

essential when marketing organic textiles.

Certification for organic textiles not only gives the marketer confidence in their products, but also helps to assure sceptical consumers that the organic provenance is genuine and is not compromised by the processing of the fibre.

## Where in the world?

Assuming a competent certifier has been decided upon, the chosen standards and certification mark will in most cases come down to the location of the market. Different certification marks and standards have more or less meaning to certain geographical consumer groups. For example, with over 70% of UK organic food already carrying the Soil Association symbol, UK consumers consider this symbol the most trusted and recognised. For Dutch, German and French consumers, the same could be said of the SKAL, IVN and Ecocert certification marks, respectively.

Besides the obvious factors to consider when choosing an organic standard (e.g. cost), compatibility with other standards should also be considered. Companies may wish to sell their certified products to other markets where a currently held certificate may not be well recognised. If the company's certification is not compatible with standards in another country, customers may have real difficulty getting these products re-certified to local specifications.

## Label flood

With so many certifications and standards being developed around the world, by 2002 'certification equivalence' had begun to present some serious challenges to the growing international trade in



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certified textile goods. By the time of the 2002 Intercot conference in Dusseldorf, it was clear that a move to harmonise standards was badly

needed. This conference saw the

International Association Natural Textile Industry, the Soil Association, the Japanese Organic Cotton Association and the US Organic Trade Association join forces to form an international working group charged with the task of progressing harmonisation. By 2005 the group had agreed a first version of the Global Organic Textile Standards (GOTS), which have since been adopted by each organisation in place of their existing private standards.

To date four major certifiers, the Institute for Market Oekology, Oregon Tilth Certified Organic, Soil Association Certification and Control Union (formerly SKAL International) have all applied to certify to the GOTS. As other certifiers show an interest in GOTS, it seems that the standard is already close to achieving its original lofty goal of harmonising global certification systems, making it increasingly easier to transfer certification marks between different countries.

All the certifiers mentioned are currently entering into a transitional phase. Those looking at certificates should note that current certifications could be to either existing standards or GOTS. It's anticipated that all licensees of current GOTS certifiers will be fully compliant with GOTS by the end of 2007. Soil Association Certification Limited is currently working with several major retail brands to encourage supply chains to seek certification to GOTS. With the support of organisations like the Soil Association an increasing number of fully certified products are swaying eco-savvy consumers, which can only ultimately benefit the farmer, the textile worker, the consumer and of course the environment.