

# Prospects of Organic cotton in Pakistan

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Agriculture

HANIA ASLAM discusses the latest tilt towards growing eco-friendly cotton which will not only positively effect our environment but also help capture overseas markets

**O**rganic Cotton, unlike conventional cotton, is grown without using chemical fertilizers, fungicides, herbicides, insecticides, growth regulators (like steroids) and defoliants (leaf shedding chemicals). It is also called green, natural or environmental friendly cotton. In Pakistan organic cotton is sold at a premium price of about 20 per cent.

Organic cotton production has many advantages, but apparently higher production costs that are higher than those of conventional cotton, seem to restrict wider implementation.

At present small companies, throughout the world dominate the market for organic cotton and ecotextiles. Larger companies are still hesitant about engaging eco-textile trade, but there are signs that this is changing.

Recently three large public companies in the West, Gap, Levi's and Nike have started to blend the organic cotton used in their mainline clothing products. Though the percentage blend is small, these companies produce at such a large volume that the number of organic cotton bales purchased is significant for the suppliers. This would lead to greater areas in U.S being converted from conventional to organic cotton.

The creation of a domestic market for organic textiles and organic cotton could only happen on a large scale with the general improvement of environmental health and safety education in the developing countries.

In Pakistan due to high use of pesticides, more than 20,000 workers suffer irreparable loss to life and health every year. The Conventional cotton is grown mostly on canal irrigated system and 70-80 per cent imported chemical pesticide is sprayed on it. A

sudden change therefore is not possible in the system.

Conversion to the organic system has been very gradual in this part of the world and is being adopted as a symbol "Back to nature". Pakistan is perhaps the only country in the world where the organic system has not been patronised yet. In Pakistan, the textile industry is generally going through a slump period and there are a few textile enterprises that are making a substantial profit by exporting their value-added products. However, these companies are facing an extremely competitive atmosphere, especially with the introduction and stricter implementation of rules and regulations under multilateral and bilateral trading agreements such as "Agreement on Technical Barriers to Trade", approved under WTO in the Western markets, which are threatening to limit the import from countries that fail to comply with international environmental standards. In such a scenario, Pakistani textile industry is under pressure to upgrade its production system by promoting the use of organic cotton in its textile products. Due to this, some of the companies such as Chenab Group of industries, one of the largest exporters of textile products in Pakistan, have shown interest in actively participating to help farmers in shifting to more sustainable cotton. Hence, in case this concern is widely articulated by the textile industry and an attempt is made to adopt practice of using organic cotton in the international markets, Pakistan can effectively tap into the newly emerging lucrative market in organic cotton.

Countries like Pakistan are dependent on the technological advances directly related to the future extension of organically grown cotton. The already low use of agrochemicals in

Pakistan as compared to other countries, and cotton manual picking indicate that farmers in Pakistan might have a strong interest in growing organic cotton provided adequate technical know-how is made available. Moreover the export market for organic cotton products like clothing and other high value added products is emerging and could develop into an important niche market in the future. The high premium earned by organic cotton means that incentives exist for producers to change cropping patterns and the nature of agricultural production.

Being an agriculture based country, Pakistan has the potential and capacity to change the conventional system and switch to organic farming as a symbol of "Back To Nature".

Improvements are needed in production technology through research and development at farm level including:

- \* biologically based pest management
- \* non-chemical weed control
- \* soil fertility management
- \* and for mechanically harvested cotton, management techniques to replace chemical defoliants (leaf shedding chemicals)

Moreover there is a need for a coordinated research programme involving industry, government, research institutes, extensionists and farmers. Farmers should be closely involved through participatory extension techniques. Research and extension must not be considered separately from farmers themselves and their organisations, as their collaboration is essential if Pakistan is to become an organic cotton growing country. ■

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