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Putting the Farmer First:

A guide to buying cotton directly from the farmer



About this Guide

The farmer is the most important person in the cotton supply chain, but they have no say in the price they are paid for their crop. The financial insecurity they face is at the root of many social and environmental issues in the textile supply chain.

For apparel and textile brands, establishing direct buying relationships with cotton farmers is a powerful and under-used route towards supply chain transparency and sustainability. This guide provides actionable steps for brands to adopt this transformative and radically transparent approach.

TS Designs’ extensive experience working with farmers and other supply chain actors in the U.S. context is the basis for this roadmap. However, we are hopeful that it will also be useful for brands interested in buying cotton directly from farmers in other countries.

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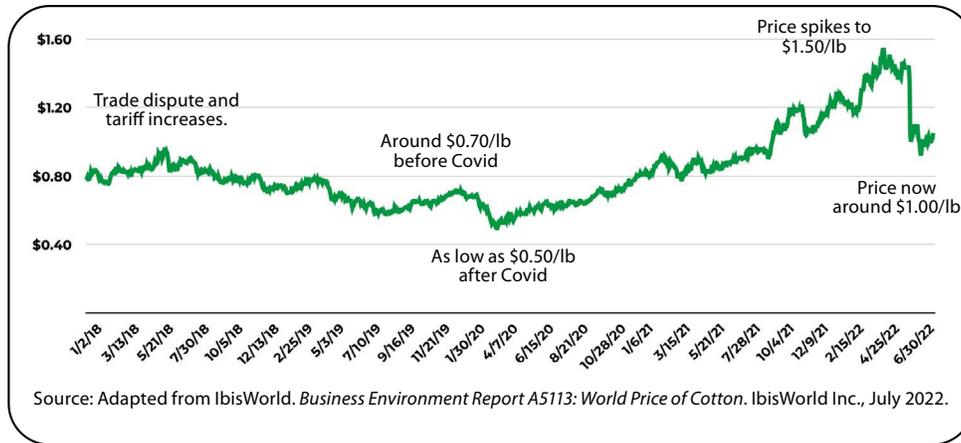
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“The farmer is the only man in our economy who buys everything at retail, sells everything at wholesale, and pays the freight both ways.” — *John F. Kennedy*



What are the issues facing cotton farmers?

Fluctuations in the commodity price of cotton: 2018-2022



Dramatic fluctuations in the global commodity price of cotton means farmers have little financial stability.

For apparel brands, the cotton farmer is the most important person in the supply chain. Despite this, they are often overlooked and have no control over the price they get paid for their crop. Not only do farmers have to contend with the weather, made increasingly unpredictable due to climate change, but they must rely on a commodity market that is beyond their control and can fluctuate wildly, particularly since the COVID-19 pandemic.

The business of farming is getting more and more difficult each year. GMO agriculture locks farmers into buying relationships with powerful multinationals; the price of fertilizers, pesticides, fuel, and equipment continue to rise; urban sprawl continues to encroach on agricultural land; and more farmers suffer from the mental health consequences of financial insecurity, bankruptcy, and ruin.

Any other part of the supply chain facing market pressure can pass on additional costs to consumers or renegotiate terms with suppliers. But farmers are "price takers," and must sell their harvest at the commodity price. This price is subject to fluctuation that can, at times, more closely resemble a

speculative stock rather than an essential good. Since the beginning of 2020, the commodity price of cotton has jolted from lows of \$0.48 to highs of \$1.55. Though some of this uncertainty is due to uncertainties surrounding the COVID-19 pandemic, over the last 20 years, 30-40% price fluctuations within a season have been the norm rather than an exception. Such radical price fluctuations make it extremely difficult for farmers to plan financially. In addition, commodity pricing hides the accomplishments of individual farmers. Even if a farmer produces their highest-quality crop in years, they will not be rewarded by an increased price. Nor will the commodity market recognize farmers for exceptional work in other areas, such as sustainable agriculture.

Meanwhile, apparel supply chains are focused on a single motivating factor: reducing price at all costs. Purchasing cotton on the commodity market essentially supports this model, but ignores the real costs incurred by farmers to produce cotton that is responsibly grown and harvested. Putting this burden on farmers only adds more pressure to the

least powerful actor in the cotton supply chain. Recognizing how dire the situation has become, a small but growing number of apparel companies are pushing back and bypassing the commodity market altogether. By setting up direct buying relationships with farmers, brands can better understand the pressures they face and discuss how to solve these problems together. Farmers can also better serve the sustainability needs of apparel brands, thus strengthening a vital link in the supply chain. Meanwhile, by hearing this story, customers can choose whether they want to invest in the people and communities responsible for producing

the crops we rely on – as well as supporting the pioneering farmers willing to experiment with sustainable agricultural methods.

Chasing the cheapest price is a race to the bottom. Ensuring cotton farmers receive a reliable income is crucial to empower the people who steward our farmland and will be pivotal actors in the transition to sustainable agriculture.

Learn more

Read TS Designs' white paper:
[Is Commodity Pricing the Best Model We Can Give Cotton Farmers?](#)

Pressure on farmers

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O

1. GMO dependence

Using GMO seed mandates the use of complementary inputs such as pesticides that lock farmers into purchasing agreements with large corporations. This leaves farmers vulnerable to price hikes and supply shortages.



2. Soil erosion

Many conventional agricultural methods cause soil erosion. Switching to no-till can reduce erosion, but requires investment in new equipment and expertise.



3. Water scarcity

Cotton is a water intensive crop. In many regions, water scarcity is of increasing concern as droughts become more common.



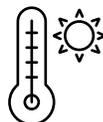
4. Urban sprawl

Many farmers lease much of their cropland. With urban sprawl, landowners are incentivized to sell their land to developers due to the higher prices they can offer.



5. Increasing price of inputs

Inflation has caused the price of inputs, particularly fuel, to skyrocket, putting even more pressure on farmers.



6. Climate change

Unpredictable and extreme weather has become increasingly common, threatening crop yields.



7. Mental health

The uncertainty and financial pressures facing farmers have resulted in a surge in depression, anxiety, and even suicide. This results in younger generations choosing not to take up the profession.



The TS Designs direct-to-farmer story

TS Designs' home state of North Carolina has been a major hub of cotton farming and textile manufacturing for generations. Globalization, however, has upended the domestic industry. Today, U.S.-grown cotton can be shipped abroad, manufactured, and shipped back to the U.S. as finished products far more cheaply than simply staying on American soil. As a result, 98% of the clothing worn in the U.S. today is manufactured abroad.

As a business focused on people, planet and profit in equal measure, with a strong focus on their local community, TS Designs was determined to buck this trend. In 2008, the company launched a new T-shirt brand: Cotton of the Carolinas. Spanning a remarkably small 700-mile radius, the brand's transparent supply chain has reconnected farmers, ginners, spinners, knitters, weavers, and sewers across North and South Carolina.

Through the Cotton of the Carolinas project, President and CEO of TS Designs, Eric Henry, began working directly with Thurman Burleson and Sons Farm. Through long conversations with father and son team Ronnie and Andrew Burleson, Eric learned how little financial security and transparency is involved in the farming profession. Prior to his involvement in the Cotton of the Carolinas project, Ronnie had never even seen a product made from his farm's cotton.



By 2020, the U.S. was in the middle of a trade war with China. With the commodity price plunging below \$0.50 a pound, the Burlesons were unable to cover their costs. In May of 2020, Eric proposed a solution: TS Designs would buy 10,000 pounds of his cotton at \$0.75 a pound. Andrew agreed, and the 10,000 Pounds of Cotton Project was born. The project continued into 2021, with TS Designs increasing their price to \$0.85 to buy 20,000 pounds of the Burlesons' cotton. Eric and Andrew eventually renegotiated the price at the end of the year to \$1.00 to cover Andrew's rapidly increasing costs.

At the time of writing in July 2022, Eric and Andrew are looking at a price of almost \$1.50 a pound, partly caused by the impact of the Russian invasion of Ukraine on the global agricultural landscape.

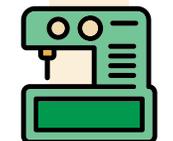
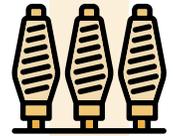
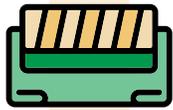
TS Designs will increase their purchase to 40,000 pounds. The price, however, has not yet been settled on: there are too many variables for Andrew to determine the price for a crop that he will not harvest for another six months.

The terms of TS Designs' agreement with the Burlesons have continued to evolve with changes in the market. More than anything, it is the trust they have built during their long-standing business relationship that has been central to making this strategy work.

“ So many times, I heard Andrew say ‘I hope for good weather, I hope for a better price, I hope, I hope, I hope.’ This is the person who puts in the most investment and the most time into the supply chain — and they run their business on hope?”
— *Eric Henry*



How the cotton supply chain works



Farming

Cotton's journey 'from dirt to shirt' starts at the farm. In the U.S., cotton is mostly grown in the 17 'Cotton Belt' states, from Virginia to California. Cottonseed is planted from March to June and harvested from August to December.

Ginning

After harvesting, cotton is sent to a ginning facility where the cotton is dried out and the white fibers are separated from the seeds, stems, leaves, and other debris.

Spinning

Ginned cotton fibers are then spun into yarn in a spinning facility. They first go through a carding machine, which brushes the fibers to straighten them and discards any which are too short. Fibers then go through several other machines, which stretch and twist the fibers before spinning them into yarn.

Knitting or weaving

The cotton yarn is then sent on to another facility to be knitted or woven into fabric, depending on the type of garment to be produced.

Finishing

The cotton fabric is then sent to a finishing plant, where it undergoes various processes to ensure it has the necessary qualities to become a usable garment. These processes include singeing to smooth the surface of the fabric, bleaching to remove natural coloration, dyeing, and printing.

Cutting and sewing

After finishing, the fabric is transferred to a factory to be cut and sewn into garments.

Benefits of buying direct from the farmer

“ I have learned over our 16-year journey the most valuable asset we have is not another certification or new technology, but the relationship of trust we have built.” — *Eric Henry*

Transparency: With supply chains spanning across the globe, monitoring growing operations has become increasingly challenging. By sourcing directly from farmers, buyers can ensure the cotton they purchase is from a reputable source that shares their values. Due to disparities in regulation enforcement overseas, achieving transparency is a necessary step to protect both farmers and the environment and poses a strong argument for reshoring supply chains.

Resiliency: Cotton can be an unpredictable crop. Due to circumstances beyond anyone's control, volume, quality, and price can vary dramatically from one season to the next. By forming direct partnerships with farmers, brands can build trust and navigate uncertainty by negotiating mutually acceptable terms whether growing or market conditions are favorable or poor.

Certainty: By bypassing the commodity market, farmers can achieve greater certainty on price, allowing them to create more accurate financial forecasts. This is especially important in today's environment, where future generations are increasingly reticent to continue running the family farm. Giving farmers more financial certainty is therefore crucial to guarantee the future of the farming industry in the U.S. and elsewhere.

Sustainability: Increasing farmers' financial stability through direct buying relationships is the first step towards enabling them to make investments in sustainable agriculture they may otherwise be unable to afford. By working together, both the farmer and your brand can decide on a program which will help to achieve both parties' desired sustainability goals.

Marketing opportunities: Consumers are increasingly conscious of where their products come from. By sourcing directly from farmers, brands can tell a compelling and personal story about the farms and the people involved in growing the cotton their clothes are made from. These stories can even evolve with the four seasons, tracking farmers at each stage of the growing season on their journey to produce the best quality crop.

Systemic change: The global cotton supply chain is deeply flawed. The commodity price of cotton is kept artificially low due to a combination of factors including government subsidies and lax international regulations. We are reaching a state of crisis as farmers face financial insecurity at the very moment we need them to invest in improving their environmental practices. Buying directly from farmers is a creative intervention which can help to combat this problem.



Environmental and social concerns in cotton farming

Environmental effects

Overreliance on pesticides and fertilizers can lead to the contamination of water ways and damage to ecosystems. Cotton can also be very fossil fuel and water intensive, leading to air pollution, global warming, and the depletion of fresh water. Some estimate that it can take up to 2,700 liters of water to produce a single T-shirt.

Labor practices

Cotton farming in developing countries has been linked to labor violations, including the use of child and forced labor. In recent years, Uzbekistan and the Xinjiang region of China have both come under fire for the use of forced labor in cotton production. Without even knowing it, apparel brands may be inadvertently supporting these inhumane labor practices.

Transparency beyond certification

“We believe the most important thing is transparency. I’m not saying we’re perfect or that there’s no room for improvement, but there will never be any question who made our T-shirts.”
— *Eric Henry*

Limitations of certifications

In an industry rife with greenwashing, having proof to back up your claims is essential. Certification schemes are generally regarded as reliable, third-party measures of the ethical and environmental integrity of a product’s supply chain, and thus are often sought after by brands and consumers alike. But relying on certifications alone to communicate your impact means your brand risks oversimplifying complex supply chain issues – or worse, obscuring them.

Certification bodies serve an important purpose by striving to improve operating standards in several industries. However, certifications vary in quality, with some having far more stringent standards than others. A number of high-profile schemes have made headlines by failing to sufficiently monitor the operations of the businesses they claim to oversee, leading to corporate scandals and skepticism regarding the schemes’ efficacy. More commonly, the standards the certifications enforce fail to have the impact that their marketing implies.

Furthermore, there is no “one-size-fits-all” solution to sustainable farming. The parameters of a given certification may therefore not be appropriate for a farm in a particular region. Many supply chain actors also strive to improve

their environmental footprint or the lives of community members in ways that cannot be captured by the narrowly defined scope of a certification. Some schemes also require certified companies to pay substantial fees, making them less accessible to small or medium-sized companies.

There is no doubt that certification can be a useful tool for brands looking to improve performance along people and planet dimensions, build legitimacy, and gain consumer trust. However, the only way to credibly substantiate your claims to your customers is to open yourself up to scrutiny by maintaining a fully traceable supply chain. Transparency is the ultimate signal to your customers that your brand has nothing to hide.

Limitations of organic

One of the best-known and most popular certifications for cotton is organic cotton. Organic production is widely regarded as the gold standard in agriculture due to the huge advantages it has for people and planet, and organically grown products have rapidly increased in popularity in recent years. However, the conversation around organic cotton is rarely treated with enough nuance. By strictly seeking

out 100% organic cotton, brands are not only missing out on opportunities to make a positive impact – they may also inadvertently be doing more harm than good.

Financial constraints for farmers: Organic farming is a very different process to conventional farming, and requires learning an entirely new set of agricultural methods. A typical farm takes around three years to convert to organic, during which time a farm cannot legally sell organic-labeled cotton and therefore cannot benefit from the higher market price of organic cotton. Given that farming is already such a financially risky enterprise, many farmers in the U.S. feel they simply cannot afford to invest in the conversion process.

Risk of mislabeling: Without transparency as to precisely where the certified organic cotton comes from, brands have no guarantee that the cotton used in their products genuinely is organic. In early 2022, the New York Times reported that between one half and four-fifths of the certified organic cotton from India – the largest organic cotton producer in the world – is, in fact, mislabeled. Furthermore, at the point the cotton arrives to the brand, there is no way to test whether the fiber is genuinely organic.

Wicker, Alden, et al. "That Organic Cotton T-Shirt May Not Be as Organic as You Think." *The New York Times*, 14 Feb. 2022, www.nytimes.com/2022/02/13/world/asia/organic-cotton-fraud-india.html.

Regional differentiation: The variability of terrain and weather conditions in the U.S. means that organic cotton production is more viable in some areas than others. Most of the U.S. organic supply is grown in Texas, where cold winter temperatures reduce insect pressure and defoliate the plants without

need for artificial inputs. The state's hot weather and quick-drying soil also limits weed growth. In North Carolina, by contrast, organic production leaves farmers with very few options to control weeds and insects. No farmer in North Carolina has yet been able to make organic production work long-term.

Variability in U.S. organic supply: Variation in quality and quantity of U.S.-grown organic cotton is a significant challenge. Even in Texas, where most U.S. organic cotton is grown, rainfall is highly unpredictable. As most organic farms in Texas have limited irrigation, production varies widely from year to year.

A flexible approach to sourcing U.S.-grown organic

Kelly Pepper, Manager of Texas Organic Cotton Cooperative, recommends that brands committed to using U.S.-grown organic cotton in their products develop a program that is flexible: committing to as much organic or transitional cotton as is available and blending it in a product with non-organic cotton. Even though this blend could not legally be labeled as an organic cotton product in the U.S., the brand can still tell their customers about the positive impact of the product through their marketing channels.

Encouraging more sustainable agricultural practices

Currently, 88% of the cotton grown in the U.S. is planted with GMO, insect-resistant seed, which by definition cannot be classed as organic. Between 2016 to 2020, the amount of organic cotton grown in the U.S. increased by a third. But given the high financial risk associated with transitioning to organic practices, it is unrealistic to expect the majority of U.S. cotton farms to completely transform their farming methods in the coming years.

Furthermore, successful farming methods are highly dependent on location. Geographical variations in weather, soil quality, biodiversity, and other situational factors means a one-size-fits-all approach to sustainability in cotton farming simply is not viable. Environmentally conscious farming is a constant process of experimentation and learning.

In the Burlesons' experience, practices that work well one year can fail the next simply due to changes in weather.

It is therefore important for brands to be pragmatic and recognize that improvements can only occur in a way that is realistic for the farmer, who knows their land better than anyone else. By providing the farmer with enough income to invest in more eco-friendly methods, your brand has the opportunity to identify achievable sustainability goals that suit both your brand and the farmer.

Such goals might include:

- Introducing cover crops
- Improving soil health
- Adopting no-till methods
- Transitioning from GMO to non-GMO seed
- Experimenting with crop rotation
- Converting to organic production
- Reducing water usage
- Implementing a carbon credit program
- Implementing a biodiversity credit program

USDA. "Organic Cotton Market Summary." United States Department of Agriculture, Aug. 2021.

Communicating impact beyond certification

The TS Designs 'Clothing Facts' label is based on nutritional labels found on food. Printed on the sleeves of many of their T-shirts, this label lists the ethical credentials of the product.

More recently, TS Designs has begun printing **QR codes** on the inside of their T-shirts. These codes link to a website that shows the names and locations of each member of their supply chain.

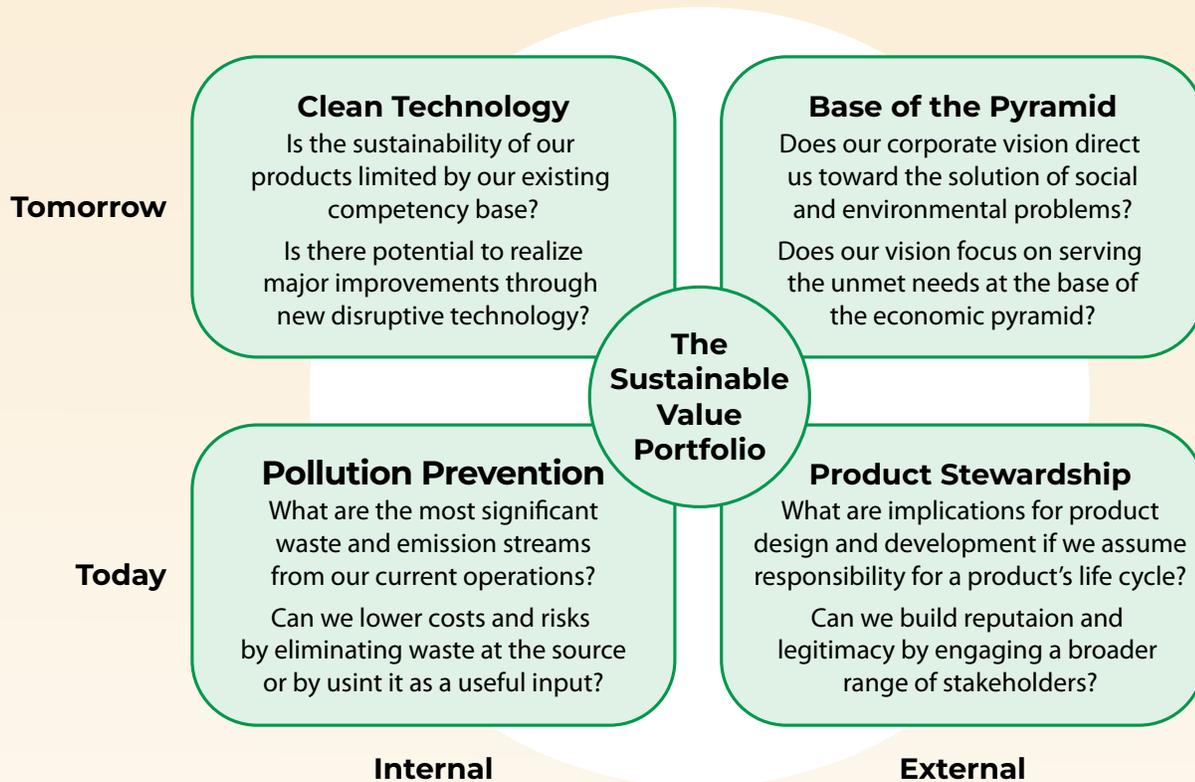
| Clothing Facts | |
|--------------------------|------|
| Amount Per Shirt | |
| % Daily Values | |
| North Carolina Cotton | 100% |
| North Carolina Made | 100% |
| Water Based Inks | 100% |
| Trackable Dirt-to-Shirt | 100% |
| Transparent Supply Chain | 100% |
| Shrinkage | 0% |
| B Corp Certified | 100% |

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The Sustainable Value Portfolio

Stuart Hart’s Sustainable Value Portfolio can be used to help businesses identify strategies that both drive shareholder value and address society’s greatest challenges. By sourcing cotton directly from the farmer, your brand can address all four dimensions of the framework.



Source: Adapted from Hart, S. 1997. "Beyond greening: Strategies for a sustainable world." Harvard Business Review, Jan-Feb: 66-76.

The bottom two quadrants focus on a company’s existing competencies, while the upper two focus on building competencies for the future. The left side of the framework focuses on internal operations, while the right side focuses on the way the company interacts with external stakeholders.

Currently, the majority of businesses’ sustainability strategies focus heavily on the efficiency and financial gains achieved through the Pollution Prevention quadrant. The threat of highly publicized corporate scandals has also encouraged many businesses to focus on maintaining positive relations with external stakeholders through the Product Stewardship quadrant.

For forward-thinking companies wishing to futureproof their business’s mission and vision, engaging in strategies from the Base of the Pyramid quadrant – which aims to transform systems to bring about social and environmental justice for marginalized actors – is essential. However, this remains one of the least-traversed paths in corporate sustainability.

How does the direct-to-farmer approach address the Sustainable Value Portfolio?

Tomorrow

Clean Technology

Advancements in technology are continually disrupting the farming industry. Providing farmers with adequate resources allows them to deploy and develop green technologies to futureproof their operations.

Base of the Pyramid

As farmers are the most vulnerable and exploited actors in the supply chain, paying them a fair price for their crop bypasses the systemic injustices of the conventional supply chain system. This is at the heart of TS Designs' approach.

Today

Pollution Prevention

Agreeing on fair value for crops allows farmers to invest in fuel and resource efficient agricultural methods. By sourcing from local farmers and manufacturers, your brand can also cut down on carbon emissions from transportation.

Product Stewardship

Maintaining a transparent supply chain helps you to build trust with customers and external stakeholders by opening yourself up to scrutiny and proving you have nothing to hide – a rare occurrence in the textile and apparel industries.

Internal

External



How to begin sourcing cotton directly from farmers

1. Find the right fiber

Different woven textile products lend themselves to different qualities of cotton fiber. The first step towards finding a farm to work with is to find a good quality of cotton fiber suitable for your product.

The U.S. produces a vast range of fibers, from short, thick fiber ideal for coarsely woven and heavier cloth, to long-staple cotton perfect for tightly woven and fine fabrics. The USDA (U.S. Department of Agriculture) grades every bale of upland cotton produced in the U.S. according to several different criteria. More information about the cotton grading process can be found in Cotton Inc.'s [The Classification of Cotton](#) report.

To find the right fiber, you should first get in touch with a spinner. In the U.S., the two major spinners are [Parkdale Mills](#) and [Hill Spinning](#). Spunlab is a division of Parkdale that focuses in specialty yarns and may be able to accommodate small purchase orders. They will be able to advise what grade of fiber you need for your product and where in the U.S. that fiber is grown. From there, you can narrow down your list to identify specific farms.

2. Define your purchase order quantity

Generally, when U.S. cotton cooperatives sell cotton, they sell a blend of cotton of the same quality from multiple farmers. While this ensures there is a sufficient quantity of cotton of the same quality to sell to buyers, it effectively obscures its traceability at the farm level.

- **Determine the minimum order quantity:** If you wish to process cotton from a single farm, your brand will need to purchase a large enough quantity to be processed as one order through the ginning, spinning, knitting, and cutting and sewing facilities. If a quantity is too small, it may not be able to be processed on the equipment. It may also not be financially viable for the facility to process it if the cost of production would be greater than any profits earned from a small order.
- **Team up with other brands:** The minimum orders can vary significantly depending on the processing facility used. If your purchase order fails to meet the minimum quantity required by the processor, you may consider teaming up with other brands to place an order together. If this route is of interest to you, feel free to get in touch with Eric Henry at eric@tsdesigns.com who is building a community of brands willing to adopt this approach.

3. Meet the farmer and build your supply chain

Once you have chosen a desired quality and quantity of your cotton fiber, you can begin to build a relationship with the farmer who produces it.

- **Commit to long-term partnership:** You should plan to buy cotton directly from the farmer for a minimum of three years. A commitment of one to two years is too short to make a significant positive impact and risks disrupting the farmer's operations for too little benefit.
- **Build trust:** Long-term buying relationships based on trust typically take years to develop. However, this process can be accelerated by maintaining strong lines of communication, transparency of information, and a shared sense of purpose. Co-ordinating a visit to the farm is a fantastic opportunity to deepen your understanding of their business, the challenges they face, their hopes and future plans.
- **Build your supply chain:** By starting with the farmer, you can begin building out the rest of your supply chain connections. The cotton and apparel manufacturing industry, as big as it is, often feels like a small world. Through conversations with the farmer, you can find out what relationships they already hold with ginners, spinners, and other manufacturing facilities. You can also find out details about each facility in terms of their capacity and reliability, along with any other important considerations.



“ I don't want to dictate the price to Andrew – we want to bring enough value so that Andrew doesn't see this as a negotiation the farmer's lost. That's the whole purpose of the project: bringing the farmer back to the table so they have a voice in what that price is.”
— *Eric Henry*

4. Determine an agreeable price

Bypassing the commodity market price – which fluctuates wildly to the detriment of both farmer and buyer – is a key component of the TS Designs sourcing approach. Trust and open communication are crucial in this process: the goal is to give the farmer an opportunity to negotiate a fair price, which is not possible on the commodity market.

- **Understand the farmer's costs:** Your key aim is to understand the farmers' expected costs and work out from there what an agreeable price would be for the farmer.
- **Understand the farmer's planned investments:** Another important consideration is to understand what the farmer's planned (or hoped-for) investments are. As farmers operate in a climate of extreme uncertainty, with an unknown crop yield and price on any given year, making investments to futureproof their business is not always a viable strategy. Your brand therefore has a fantastic opportunity to contribute directly to the future of the farm by paying the farmer enough to invest in the future of their business – especially if those investments lead to more sustainable agricultural practices
- **Secure a deal before the farmer commits to cooperative:** Finally, be sure to agree upon the price and quantity before the farmer commits to sell a certain percentage of their crop on to a cotton cooperative. As the majority of the farmer's income will likely still come from sales to a cooperative, being sensitive to their deadline to respond to the cooperative is crucial.
- **Embed flexibility into the contract:** Contracts between brands and farmers need to include basic parameters such as quantity and estimated delivery window, but also need to be flexible enough to account for fluctuation in the price of key indicators including diesel, fertilizer, seed, chemicals, and equipment.



5. Embrace the “slow movement”

Fast fashion retailers treat their clothing, and the people who make it, as disposable. Over-production depletes natural resources and exploits farmers and garment workers who are too often overworked and underpaid. To combat this cycle, more mindful fashion retailers are embracing slower and more thoughtful production cycles. Communicating your process thoughtfully can also be a selling point to your customers.

- **Plan for longer lead times:** Lead times for entirely domestic, U.S. based supply chains tend to be longer than the quick turnarounds optimized for the fast fashion supply chain in other countries. Furthermore, disruptions as a result of COVID-19 have hit the cotton supply chain hard. As of 2022, these issues are far from being resolved.
- **Create “traseasonal” collections:** Traditionally, the fashion industry followed the four seasons: winter, spring, summer, and fall. Today, some brands produce as much as one “micro-season” a week. By creating pieces that can be worn season-to-season, your brand can help to buck this trend.
- **Produce limited collections:** A limited collection not only cancels out the need for repeat production – it also communicates exclusivity to your customers by giving them a limited window in which to buy your product. At TS Designs’ direct-to-consumer brand Solid State Clothing, T-shirts are marketed according to the year of the cotton harvest.
- **Focus on quality:** Charging a higher price for your products is easily justified by a more durable, higher-quality product. Quantifying the value of your product’s “pay-per-wear” compared to that of a similar fast fashion item can help present a convincing argument to consumers.

6. Determine sustainability goals

Sustainable agriculture can mean vastly different things depending on the crop, region, and resources available, which highlights the importance of working with farmers and drawing from their expertise.

- **Establish realistic goals:** It is important to first determine goals that meet the needs of the farmer and have the potential to make impactful change. Whether you choose to invest in conversion to non-GMO, organic, or no-till agriculture, or develop conservation strategies to benefit from biodiversity or carbon credits, it is important to align yourself with farmers who share your vision for a more sustainable future of agriculture.
- **Budget your investments:** Change takes time and rarely occurs all at once. Embedding a defined budget for sustainable investments into your contract can ensure that funds are being allocated toward your shared goals.

7. Engage in values-driven, educational marketing

Very few apparel brands today are telling their customers the story of cotton's journey "from dirt to shirt." The TS Designs direct sourcing approach is a fantastic opportunity for your brand to engage in values-driven marketing.

- **Engage young consumers:** Buying from businesses with ethical and sustainable practices is particularly important for younger generations. 75% of Gen Z consumers report that they make purchasing decisions based on sustainability rather than brand name. This trend reaches across the generational divide, with Gen X consumers reporting a 24% increase in their willingness to spend more for sustainable products.

Wood, Johnny. "Gen Z Cares about Sustainability More than Anyone Else – and Is Starting to Make Others Feel the Same Way." *World Economic Forum*, 18 Mar. 2022, www.weforum.org/agenda/2022/03/generation-z-sustainability-lifestyle-buying-decisions.

- **Build customer and stakeholder loyalty:** A growing body of research suggests that by being a good corporate citizen, companies can increase consumer loyalty. They can even turn customers into powerful brand ambassadors who proactively advocate for the company through word of mouth and a willingness to pay a price premium. The most meaningful corporate citizenry has also been linked to increased employee retention, efficiency, and recruitment, and can even attract new investors.
- **Crop cycle content:** Partnerships with farmers offer a unique opportunity for year-round, seasonal marketing by following the farmer on their journey through each stage of the growing process.



Further resources

- [Cotton Incorporated](#)
- [Croatan Institute](#)
- [Parkdale Mills](#)
- [Spun Lab](#)
- [Texas Organic Cotton Cooperative](#)
- [Textile Exchange](#)
- [Hill Spinning](#)
- [Better Cotton](#)
- [NC Cotton Producers Association](#)

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Last but certainly not least, we thank Eric Henry, President of TS Designs, for his decades-long activism, thought leadership, and creative approach to doing business. We are continually inspired by his unwavering persistence to build a fairer and more sustainable world.



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