



Winter 2017, Issue #14

Central Valley Fiber, Forage & Nut Digest

Director's Report: Building a Stronger Partnership with Growers, UC Experts

by Marcia Gibbs

As 2017 comes to a close, we want to once again thank our farmers for their participation in our project and their willingness to share their experiences and care for their land. Our 26 growers who farm more than 3,200 acres of alfalfa, almonds and cotton have demonstrated that good stewardship and profitability can go together to provide quality products that our state is proud of.

Our field days and grower meetings were well attended and featured talks by some of the best crop experts in California. Our always popular weekly blog is a great way to stay in touch with what's going on in the local fields and orchards. It boasts more than 100,000 viewers since it was started in 2011. Visit centralvalleyfarmscout.blogspot.com.

This year's annual SCP Cotton Farm Tour was a collaboration with the Better Cotton Initiative and a great success. Nike staff from Portland joined us along with participants from California brands like GAP, Levi Strauss, and Williams Sonoma as well as other small brands and fashion university students and staff.

Find us online at sustainablecotton.org (or on social media) to learn more about what we do and see videos from our grower meetings. If you would like to be part of the project or find out more, please contact me at marcia@sustainablecotton.org.

Happy New Year.

Marcia Gibbs

Get in touch

Our website:

sustainablecotton.org

Field day videos:

sustainablecotton.org/videos

Facebook:

[facebook.com/
sustainablecottonproject](https://facebook.com/sustainablecottonproject)

SCP Twitter:

twitter.com/sustaincotton

SJSFP Twitter:

twitter.com/SJVSustainFarm

Blog:

centralvalleyfarmscout.blogspot.com

For more information or to enroll, contact Marcia Gibbs at: (530) 370-5325, or marcia@sustainablecotton.org.

Funding for this project has been provided through an agreement with the State Water Resources Control Board and the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency Clean Water Act, Section 319.



Tour Participants Set Foot on a Cotton Field for First Time

by Gilbert Mohtes-Chan

It was a first for Bay Area resident Anna Rotty, who works for Pottery Barn Kids, a division of San Francisco-based Williams Sonoma Inc.

“I’ve never seen a cotton farm. It was really interesting,” Rotty explained after the annual Cotton Farm Tour this past fall. “You get to see how everything is used in cotton.”

Rotty wasn’t alone. The majority of the 55 fashion brand representatives on the tour marveled at getting their first up-close look at the local cotton industry.

One of the most unique farm events in the US, the all-day tour offered by the Sustainable Cotton Project and the San Joaquin Sustainable Farming Project educated participants about sustainable farming practices and cotton production. They visited the colored cotton patch and perennial hedgerow grown by Windfall Farms.

They toured a working gin, learned about the future of the cotton market, sustainable farming practices, and saw cotton being harvested in the field. At every stop during the Sustainable Cotton Project’s annual event, men and women alike pulled out smart phones and digital cameras to capture every moment.

“It was fascinating,” Merrilee Avila of Nike said before she and her colleagues headed back to Portland, Oregon. She then paused and added: “I learned my job depends on agriculture.”

Westside Farmers Co-op Gin manager Matt Toste described how modules of freshly harvested cotton are transported from the field and processed inside the bustling, noisy gin, adding it takes just 45 seconds for the seed and trash to be separated from the fibers which are then compressed into 500-pound bales that are shrink-wrapped and loaded onto flatbed trailer.

Right: each tour participant got the chance to take home some hand-picked colored cotton.

Cleaner Cotton™ farmer Dan McCurdy talked about cotton production and the harvest, describing how his new harvester picks the fiber and creates the round modules stored alongside the fields for transport to the gin.

“I learned how cotton goes from the field to the gin and then is ready to be shipped,” one participant said. “Along the way I also learned more about how Cleaner Cotton™ farmers take different steps in their farming methods to produce cotton on a different level than conventional cotton farming.”



Getting a Jump on the 2018 season in Cotton, Alfalfa

by Gilbert Mohtes-Chan

Cotton and alfalfa growers have plenty to do to prepare for the coming season. The University of California Integrated Pest Management Program offers these wintertime tasks for growers:

Cotton

- Consider pest history and surrounding crops.
- Consider crop rotations if a field had severe problems in 2017 with root knot nematode, verticillium wilt, fusarium wilt, or seedling diseases.
- Look at precision tillage and ripping for areas with a history of soil compaction, particularly if root knot nematodes are also a problem.
- Survey and manage weeds. Record your findings and treat if needed according to cotton pest management guidelines.

- Select a cotton variety based on local conditions and climate and field history of verticillium wilt, fusarium wilt and root knot nematode.
- Consider a seed treatment for pests based on field history and according to the cotton pest management guidelines for aphids, seedcorn maggot, seedling diseases, thrips and wireworms.
- Start planning for when to plant around March 5 by checking 5-day degree-day forecast and taking soil temperature.

Alfalfa

- Survey winter weeds through January and record results.
- Determine weed management strategy based on 2017 weed types and abundance. You should consider applying a pre or post-emergence herbicide or a combination of both

- (appropriate for the weed pressure); overseeding with grasses and legumes in older, depleted stands; grazing or cultivating with a spring-toothed harrow, taking care to minimize damage to the alfalfa crowns.
- Note any special weed problems such as dodder and perennial weeds. Manage, if needed, according to the pest management guidelines.
- Start monitoring for aphids in January.
- Monitor for weevils by looking for chewed leaves, especially on stands putting on new growth. Take sweep-net samples when alfalfa height allows and manage if needed.
- Look for signs of vertebrate pests such as gophers, meadow voles or ground squirrels. Manage, if needed, according to the pest management guidelines.
- Scout for signs of stem nematode through March or April.

Brands, Consumers Driving Force Behind Sustainable Practices in Cotton

by Gilbert Mohtes-Chan

For several years, a small group of innovative cotton growers in the Northern San Joaquin Valley have led the way in sustainable farming practices.

Slowly but surely their support and advocacy is catching on. Just look at some of the headlines: “Millennials Driving Brands to Practice Socially Responsible Marketing” (Forbes, March 17). Or: “How Clothing Brands are Embracing Transparency to Meet the Growing Demand for Sustainable Apparel” (Adweek, May 2017).

This trend is taking off and becoming a driving force in getting cotton growers to embrace sustainable farming practices, according to Stephen Harmer, of Jess Smith & Sons Cotton, a Bakersfield cotton marketer.

“There is this huge shift going on,” Stephen told a group of fashion brand representatives attending this fall’s Cotton Farm Tour sponsored by the Sustainable Cotton Project (SCP). The 75.4 million millennials – the up and coming generation of 20 to 36-year-olds – are behind this dynamic market trend.

“They want to see a sustainable product that they are purchasing. They want to see traceability. We are seeing more and more demand for

cotton, whether it is organic, Better Cotton Initiative (BCI) cotton or Cleaner Cotton™,” Harmer said. “More and more you are seeing sustainable products that are traced all the way back to the farmer. That is very common now. I think it will continue to grow.”

SCP has a long track record of working with Valley growers to produce trademarked Cleaner Cotton™. SCP works with growers to follow best management practices and avoid using the most harmful chemicals used to produce their cotton crop.

BCI is a global program in which growers adhere to a various sustainable standards. SCP’s Cleaner Cotton™ also uses sustainable practices and can be traced back to the grower and the field it was grown, in making it trackable.

Jess Smith sells the growers’ cotton directly to textile mills, which allows the marketer to generate premiums for the farmer as well as provide assurance the fiber has been grown sustainably and can be traced back to the farm. The company markets both Cleaner Cotton™ and BCI cotton, as well as conventional cotton.

Another selling point: The Valley’s reputation for growing some of the highest quality cotton in the world. “Cotton is the longest and strongest fiber in the entire world. It is by far the most sustainable crop in the entire world,” Harmer says.

Below: freshly-ginned California cotton ready to be shipped.



Above: a sampling of Cleaner Cotton™ products — yarns by Quince & Co. and hand towels designed by Mark Wilhite and woven by Jann Coury with yarn by Lunatic Fringe.

Harmer predicts China will become a bigger buyer of cotton in the coming years. China, he said, “is very pro-US cotton. They want to buy high quality, traceable, machine picked, good quality cotton fiber, which primarily is grown in the USA, Brazil and Australia. We have a very positive outlook for cotton in the next three to five years.”

“BCI and Cleaner Cotton™ are becoming much more popular in the market,” Harmer said. “It is being driven by the brands and the consumers that are looking for the sustainable product.”

Because of this consumer trend, Stephen anticipates more conventional cotton growers turning to sustainable cotton production practices.

“You get a little pushback from some (growers),” Harmer said. But he adds that “a lot of them are smart enough to know if the brands and the consumer are pushing for this then they eventually are going to jump on board. The whole industry is really turning in a good direction.”

Winter Chores Await Almond Growers

Field scout Jenna Mayfield says almond growers will be keeping busy with winter chores. Here is her to-do list for growers:

- Survey the trees to make sure there are no more than two mummy nuts per tree by February 1. Jenna points out that University of California researchers have found ignoring winter mummy nut sanitation leads to higher populations of overwintering navel orangeworm and greater kernel damage at harvest time.
- Inspect drip irrigation lines and sprinkler heads and make the necessary repairs. Growers don't want to wait until they start irrigating next season and discover their drip lines are damaged.
- Fix the potholes on access roads. Growers can scrap the dirt and level to smooth the roadway.



- Remove loose or broken bark caused by shakers. These nooks could become winter havens for pests.
- Survey the orchard floor for weeds and identify those that were not controlled by a fall pre-emergent treatment. Record the findings. UC Integrated Pest Management says growers should consider applying a post-emergent treatment in January.

Here are other chores identified by UC IPM:

- Take a dormant spur sample for scale and mite eggs until mid-January. Make sure to record the findings. Treat if necessary.
- Check trees for hiding places for peach twig borer. If treatment is needed, use a more environmentally friendly material or put off treatment until bloom.
- Monitor for rust in orchards with almond varieties that keep their leaves. Treatment would come in the spring.
- Watch for gophers and mound-building activity.
- Treat only when needed using targeted material for control.

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