

Organic Wool Fact Sheet

What is organic wool?

For wool to be certified as organic in the United States, it must be produced in accordance with federal standards for organic livestock production as described the U.S. Department of Agriculture's National Organic Standards.¹ These include:

- Use of genetic engineering is prohibited;
- All livestock feed, forage and bedding (if roughage) used from the last third of gestation must be certified organic (including pasture);
- All organic sheep must have year-round access to the outdoors and obtain a minimum of 30% of their dry matter intake from pastures for a minimum of 120 days to ensure grazing is a substantive portion of the animal's diet;
- Use of conventional synthetic hormones, medicines, and synthetic pesticides (internal, external, and on pastures, including organophosphates, amidines, and synthetic pyrethroids²), is prohibited. Only those "least toxic" materials on the National List of Allowed and Prohibited Substance as found in the organic regulations (section 205.603) may be used;
- Producers must encourage livestock health through preventive disease management practices prior to the use of approved synthetic medicines.

Organic livestock management is different from non-organic management in several ways:

- Organic sheep cannot be dipped in commonly used parasiticides (insecticides).
- Organic sheep must have access to the outdoors at all times. (NOTE: Animals may be temporarily confined during bad weather to prevent illness and environmental damage.)
- Mulesing, the practice of removing strips of wool-bearing skin from around sheep's buttocks to prevent flystrike, is prohibited. (Note: In the US, these provisions are in the final organic livestock rule currently on hold.³ Mulesing is already prohibited by IFOAM - Organics International, the international federation of organic agriculture movements.⁴ Mulesing is not practiced in the US.)
- Tail docking is prohibited shorter than the caudal fold, and only in a manner that minimizes pain.

¹ U.S. Department of Agriculture's National Organic Standards 7 CFR 205. <https://www.gpo.gov/fdsys/granule/CFR-2011-title7-vol3/CFR-2011-title7-vol3-part205/content-detail.html>, and ATTRA, "Sheep: Sustainable and Organic Production," 2010. <https://attra.ncat.org/attra-pub/summaries/summary.php?pub=209>

² Parasitipedia.net. Dipping livestock to control ticks, flies, mites, lice, blowfly strike and other parasites on cattle, sheep, goats, pig and poultry. Viewed August 23, 2017. http://parasitipedia.net/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=2427&Itemid=2683

³ U.S. Department of Agriculture, National Organic Program: Livestock and Poultry Practices Final Rule, January 19, 2017 (on-hold). <https://www.federalregister.gov/documents/2017/01/19/2017-00888/national-organic-program-nop-organic-livestock-and-poultry-practices>

⁴ IFOAM, "The IFOAM Norms for Organic Agriculture and Processing," 2014. http://www.ifoam.bio/sites/default/files/ifoam_norms_july_2014_t.pdf

- Organic livestock producers are required to ensure that they do not exceed the natural carrying capacity of the land on which their animals graze.

Third-party certification organizations verify that organic producers use only methods and materials allowed in organic production.

What are the benefits of wool?

Fiber: Wool is a natural, renewable and durable fiber. When you choose organic wool, you are also supporting more sustainable farming practices.

Food: Wool also serves as a secondary source of income for farmers raising sheep for meat or dairy products (cheese, yogurt, butter).

Where are organic sheep raised?

An estimated 10,698,697 organic sheep were raised in 53 countries around the world in 2015, mostly in China, the United Kingdom, Argentina, Italy, and Greece (U.S. ranked 32 with 10,741 sheep, and Canada ranked 38 with 3,667. No organic sheep have been reported in Mexico).⁵ Organic sheep represented almost one percent (0.92) of all 1.163 billion sheep in 2015.⁶

What about the processing of organic wool?

While organic sheep must be raised according to OFPA and the U.S. Department of Agriculture National Organic Program (USDA NOP) rules, the processing of raw organic wool into finished products is addressed by the voluntary [Global Organic Textile Standard \(GOTS\)](#).⁷ GOTS requires a minimum of 70% organic fiber (in this case wool), prohibits the use of toxic processing inputs – including dyes and chlorine-based pre-treatments for scouring and descaling (for machine washability)⁸ – and requires the treatment of wastewater discharged from cleaning, dyeing and other wool processing stages. As with organic fiber certification, such processing is verified by a third-party independent certification organization. Note that GOTS recognizes the USDA National Organic Program’s (NOP) authority⁹ and NOP recognizes GOTS, stating that textiles certified to GOTS may be sold in the U.S. as organic.¹⁰

In what kinds of products is organic wool used today?

Organic wool can be used in any application in which conventional wool is used. Some of the organic wool products most widely available today are apparel (casual and activewear) for babies, men, and women; blankets/throws; jackets and vests; knitting yarn; mattresses/pillows; socks/leggings; and sweaters. As the market for organic wool products grows, so, too, are

⁵ FiBL, Organic Sheep Statistics 2007-2015, July 19, 2017.

⁶ International Wool Textile Organization (IWTO), “Wool Production.” Viewed September 7, 2017: <http://www.iwto.org/wool-production>

⁷ Global Organic Textile Standard, Global Organic Textile Standard - Version 5, March 2015. http://www.global-standard.org/images/GOTS_Documents/GOTS_Standard_5.0.pdf

⁸ O Ecotextiles, “What Does Organic Wool Mean?” November 8, 2009. <https://ecotextiles.wordpress.com/2009/08/11/what-does-organic-wool-mean/> and Patagonia – The Footprint Chronicles, “On Wool and Chlorine.” https://www.patagonia.com/on/demandware.static/Sites-patagonia-us-Site/Library-Sites-PatagoniaShared/en_US/PDF-US/chlorine_free_wool.pdf

⁹ Global Organic Textile Standard, GOTS Version 5, March 2015. http://www.global-standard.org/images/GOTS_Documents/GOTS_Standard_5.0.pdf

¹⁰ U.S. Department of Agriculture, “Labeling of Textiles That Contain Organic Ingredients,” May 20, 2011. <https://www.ams.usda.gov/sites/default/files/media/OrganicTextilePolicyMemo.pdf>

applications expanding for its use. Ramblers Way uses fine-grade GOTS-certified organic wool fabrics for its apparel, and is looking into the use of coarser grades for other products.

Why does organic wool cost more than conventional wool?

The cost of organic wool is more than that of conventional for several reasons:

- 1) Organic wool producers receive a higher price at the farm gate, as their costs of production are higher, primarily associated with higher labor, management and certification costs.
- 2) The organic wool industry is very small relative to the overall wool industry and does not have the economies of scale and resulting efficiencies of its conventional counterpart.
- 3) Federal organic standards for livestock production prohibit overgrazing. If the price of wool is low, the difference cannot be made up by simply increasing the number of sheep per acre.

What is the market for the organic textile industry?

While there is no data for sales of organic **wool** products specifically, sales of organic apparel and home products in general are increasing at a rapid rate in the U.S. as well as globally.

- An Organic Trade Association (OTA) study showed that organic fiber (including organic wool) product sales **in the United States** reached \$1.4 billion in 2016, an increase of 9.2 percent from 2015.

- According to the OTA study, the organic fiber and textiles category continues to rank as the largest non-food organic category in the \$47 billion U.S. market, accounting for almost 40 percent of the total \$3.9 billion in organic non-food sales. (Non-food includes organic textiles, household products, personal care products, supplements, pet food and flowers.)¹¹

- A Textile Exchange study shows that overall **global** sales of organic cotton products reached an estimated \$15.76 billion in 2015.¹²

What is driving the growth in the organic wool market?

Increasing consumer awareness and the growing knowledge that what we put ON our bodies is as important as what we put IN them is driving growth in the organic textiles and fiber market. Indeed, organic is not just for eating anymore--today's consumer is embracing an organic food-to-fashion-and-home lifestyle.¹³ In addition, it is a vital fire retardant tool for organic mattresses, replacing the use of toxic fire retardant chemicals.

¹¹ Organic Trade Association, "Beyond food: Organic lifestyle brands star in pop-up event in New York," May 5, 2017. <https://www.ota.com/news/press-releases/19655>

¹² Textile Exchange, "Organic Cotton Market Report 2016," July 2016. <http://textileexchange.org/2016-organic-cotton-market-report-overview/>

¹³ Organic Trade Association, "Beyond food: Organic lifestyle brands star in pop-up event in New York," May 5, 2017. <https://www.ota.com/news/press-releases/19655>

NOTE: For more information about organic livestock production and the National List of Allowed and Prohibited Substances, please see this [OTA overview](#).

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