



Textile Exchange Responsible Wool Standard

Introduction

The Responsible Wool Standard (RWS) is an industry-led, voluntary standard that provides an opportunity for farmers to demonstrate their best practices to the public, and a means for brands and consumers to have certainty that the wool products they buy and sell are in line with their values.

The RWS is a tool to ensure that wool comes from sheep that have been raised with respect to their Five Freedoms, that the land has been managed responsibly, and to provide a robust chain of custody system to validate the source of the material for all product claims.

The Five Freedoms

1. Freedom from Hunger and Thirst
2. Freedom from Discomfort
3. Freedom from Pain, Injury or Disease
4. Freedom to Express Normal Behavior
5. Freedom from Fear and Distress

The Responsible Wool Standard is a voluntary global standard that addresses the welfare of sheep and the land they graze on.

The standard was developed through an open and transparent, multi-stakeholder process. Our International Working Group (IWG) included representation from all potential stakeholders and worked together to create a tool that balances effective requirements with realistic and auditable criteria. The standard combines expertise and perspectives from all of the major wool-growing regions of the globe.

The Strengths of a Global Standard

Do we really need a global standard?

Some argue that we do not. However, Textile Exchange received a clear message from a large number of brands that one is needed.

In almost every industry in the world, customers have begun to ask questions about where their products come from. Customers want the companies they buy from to hold high ethical standards in every aspect of their business; they are not just asking, but demanding that their supply of wool be free of questionable practices. Animal welfare organizations have challenged many industries to examine the efficacy and goals of routine farming practices around the world, causing wool production to come into focus for brands and consumers.

The RWS provides independent verification of the practices that are happening at the farm level, giving

brands a clear solution that will allow them to make claims about their wool sourcing with confidence.

Standards are a way of reducing the risk to the farmer, the supply chain and their brand partners.

Many individual and regional efforts have been made on animal welfare and land management, and several initiatives and standards exist in varying countries. The RWS does not intend to replace this work, but to provide a global benchmark to align regional practices into the context of a global industry. A global standard for the wool supply chain meets the needs of today's farmers, supply chain, brands, and consumers:

Simplicity of sourcing

Up to now, there has been no single third-party global tool for brands to efficiently source to meet their Corporate Social Responsibility goals and the expectations of the consumers. Each region could offer them different things: non-mulesed, progressive land-management, fully verified and traceable wool, self-declarations on animal welfare, etc. The RWS pulls together animal welfare and land management criteria to provide a coherent fiber supply.

Variations in legislations and enforcement

Government legislations have different focus areas, regional application, and levels of enforcement. It is costly and difficult for brands to rely on these regulations to meet their demand across multiple regions. For example, in Australia animal health and welfare is the responsibility of the six state and two territory governments. Each of these jurisdictions has specific, but separate legislation governing animal health, welfare and cruelty.

Risk management

Even if most farmers are doing the right thing, the fact remains that some are not. The last thing that a brand wants is graphic footage showing abuse of sheep in their supply chain. A standard cannot guarantee that animal welfare will be completely protected, but the RWS provides third-party audits and a transparent system to address any violations of the standard.

Self-declarations are not enough

The quality of information from self-declarations relies on the commitment and training of the individual. They carry this risk of subjective and variable interpretations and even conflicts of interest. Regular third-party audits ensure that requirements are being consistently met.

A global standard creates opportunities for all stakeholders

Connection to the consumer

The RWS will help bring the story of sheep farming to consumers. It presents an excellent opportunity for people to learn about the farmers, the incredible work that they do, and the care that they take of their land and their animals.

Efficiency

The RWS also provides a means for brands to communicate their fiber and traceability expectations clearly and consistently to any and all points in their supply networks. Multiple brands working with a single standard means economies of scale can be more quickly reached.

Flexibility

The IWG was always concerned about the practicability of the standard for the farmers around the globe, and had to balance that out against the expectations of the brands and the animal welfare groups. For this reason we've built in flexibility wherever possible, setting out the desired outcomes of the standard and leaving it to the farmers to find the most efficient ways to meet them. We also created a large range of templates and tools to help farmers, particularly with the less popular actions like record keeping.

Benchmarking Data

Part of the farm audit process includes the collection of data, ranging from the types of fiber and number of sheep to performance indicators on animal welfare and land health. By aggregating this data, brands can report on the impacts of their programs, governments can assess the effectiveness of their programs, and farmers can compare themselves against global and regional benchmarks and identify opportunities for improvement. The data will also help to revise the standard to make it more and more effective over time.

The Development of the RWS

How can an NGO like Textile Exchange develop a technical standard for sheep farming? TE's expertise is in standard development: we have created global standards for organic content (OCS), recycled inputs (RCS and GRS) and animal welfare related to down and feathers (RDS). Our standards are used throughout the textile supply chain, and are recognized for the strong chain of custody they offer for preferred materials. (Read more at <http://TextileExchange.org/Integrity>).

The greatest strength of the RWS is the process by which it was developed:

Multi-stakeholder, Transparent

The greatest strength of the RWS is the process by which it was developed. An International Working Group (IWG) was formed, representing the interests of the wide range of stakeholders with an interest in wool. The IWG included global brands from apparel and home, industry organizations (including RESP, European Outdoor Group, the Outdoor Industry Association and the IWTO – in observer status), animal welfare groups (Humane Society International, Four Paws), and established producer groups with their own standards (Ovis 21, New Zealand Merino, and New Merino). See <http://responsiblewool/org/iwg/> for a full list of IWG members.

Throughout the two years of development, as many as 50 IWG members attended our calls. Meeting notes and updates were made publicly available on the website, and all decisions were reached through consensus or majority vote. We made every effort to have all sides be heard and understood.

Experts

The RWS has been developed with the input of experts from across the industry and around the globe, including:

- Stuart Adams (Continuum Textiles) is a farmer with over 25 years of experience in sheep farming in Western Australia, as well as 10 years of supply chain experience
- Sara Shields (Humane Society International) has a PHD in animal behavior as well as many years of practical experience, and is currently a U.S. Delegate to the International Organization for Standardization (ISO) TC34 Working Group on Animal Welfare.
- William Burnidge (The Nature Conservancy) is an expert in conservation with years of experience as the Grasslands Program Director at TNC; he is also involved in the Roundtable for Sustainable Beef.

- Gyorgyi Acs (Control Union Certifications) has years of experience in developing standards and overseeing their application at both the farm and manufacturing levels. Gyorgyi played a key role in the Responsible Down Standard.

Collaboration

From the beginning we tried to integrate the excellent work that had already been done at different levels of the industry. Private organizations like New Zealand Merino were active contributors; Ovis 21, The Nature Conservancy and Predator Friendly gave us strong input into land management issues; and we ensured that the requirements of the standard addressed the Five Freedoms and covered all of the OIE and IWTO Animal Welfare Guidelines. We also reached out to groups such as AWI, and the IWTO participated in almost all of our calls in observer status.

Piloting

The standard was piloted in Australia, New Zealand, Argentina, China, South Africa, United States and the UK, over multiple audits. We made multiple adjustments along the way based on feedback from farmers and auditors, and were pleased to see immediate impacts in some cases: as the result of the pilot, one farm immediately changed their method of tail docking: he changed from using a knife to thermo-cauterization. We have now introduced the RWS to farmers in every major wool-producing country in the world, and the feedback we have received so far is that it is very achievable. And this does not surprise us: we've always believed that most farmers are already doing the right thing.

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The final result of the two years of work put into the development of the RWS is a strong, industry-driven, voluntary standard that ensures the animal welfare of sheep and the land they graze. You can find more information about the standard online: <http://responsiblewool.org/>.

Key Points in the RWS

Reduced risk

The RWS reduces the risk to brands, the supply chain and wool growers.

Protecting animal welfare

The Five Freedoms of sheep are protected at all times: freedom from hunger and thirst, freedom from discomfort, freedom from pain, injury or disease, freedom to express normal behavior, and freedom from fear and distress.

Preserving land health

Progressive methods of land management are practiced on RWS farms, protecting soil health, biodiversity and native species.

Supply chain traceability

The identity of the RWS wool is maintained at all times: from the farm to the final product. Consumers can have full confidence that the wool in a product carrying the RWS logo comes from responsibly managed farms.

Credible certification

A professional, third party certification body audits each stage in the supply chain.

Confident communication

Only products with 100% certified wool may carry the RWS logo. The certification of the fully supply chain ensures that the chain of custody of the RWS fiber is protected from farm to retailer.

Stakeholder engagement

Our process of standard development is open and inclusive. The RWS was developed with the input of farmers, animal welfare experts, land conservation experts, brands and retailers from all parts of the globe.

Creating a link between brands and farmers

The RWS provides an opportunity for brands and farmers to better understand each other's realities and to meet each other's needs.

About Textile Exchange

Textile Exchange (www.TextileExchange.org) is a non-profit organization that accelerates sustainability practices in the textile industry. We develop and own standards that provide traceability for materials such as organic cotton, recycled polyester, and responsibly sourced down. There has been increasing interest from brands and industry groups in creating a tool to identify the best practices to respect animal welfare and land protection for wool production.

Responsiblewool.org

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