

CONSUMERS AND NEW ENVIRONMENTAL AWARENESS

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Today's rising environmental consciousness is having a real influence on consumers' decision-making about their product purchases.

It's a consideration which may affect cotton farmers and the sales in that industry.

The lessons to be learned from the marketplace are that a growing cross section of consumers have become more aware of the environmental ramifications of their point of sale decisions. It is perhaps less well known to consumers that even with integrated pest management techniques, there is still much chemical input needed in cotton production. From the information available to us to date there is virtually no chemical-free cotton production and thus very little in the way of market indicators for such a commodity.

If one looks at a similar industry, wool producing, where small amounts of wool are produced with no chemical inputs, the result is a product that is clearly preferred by some consumers and attracts a substantial price premium. In the case of cotton, how

the consumer preference for non-damaging agriculture will be balanced against the consumer preferences for natural fibres is difficult to gauge.

Beyond these questions of the extent of chemical usage are those of the methods of delivery, particularly the widespread practice of aerial application of chemicals and associated problems like spray drift. The question close-by residents are asking is, of course, what right do farmers have to put anyone at risk from their practices.

What consumers seem to be raising are questions about the whole range of farming practices that the industry has come to depend on.

The directions these practices take will be increasingly a reflection not only of what works for farmers, but of what society is willing to accept and condone through both its governmental regulatory power and through a more informed purchasing power.