



by Leslie Petrovski

With wool prices skyrocketing and the economy sputtering, why bother with organic wool? If you're not eating it, and there's no data supporting the health benefits of wearing it, why pay the uplift? And what does it mean for wool to be organic anyway?

Like corn or soybeans, wool is an agricultural product. So whether you're talking lamb chops or lace-weight yarn, the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) basically owns the label "organic." "[The USDA] provides enforcement on all things organic," explains Sandra Marquadt, fiber spokesperson for the Organic Trade Association.

For wool, arugula, or the ham on your sandwich to be labeled organic, it must comply with the Organic Foods Production Act of 1990, which required the USDA to come up with uniform standards governing the labeling of agricultural products. To do this the USDA established the National Organic Program (NOP), which developed these standards along with an organic certification program that accredits third-party certifiers here and abroad to vet farms and processors. Today when you see that iconic green-and-white "USDA organic" logo, you can be assured that the product is "organic" as defined by the USDA.

For a manufacturer to use the phrase "organic wool" on a label, the wool in question must adhere to NOP requirements. This starts with the sheep. Just like the organic chicken you buy at Costco, the critter that grew the organic wool on your needles must have been raised without antibiotics or growth hormones, grazed on certified organic pasture (no chemical pesticides, herbicides or fertilizers allowed), and/or have been fed 100-percent organic feed. Irradiation, sewage sludge, and GMOs are no-nos. Sheep can't be dipped in insecticides to control ticks and lice, and growers must not overgraze their land or pollute local streams.

Organic production is considered more labor-intensive and expensive than conventional farming. Certification requires the keeping of exacting records, specific health practices, costly organic feed, and sustainable land management. Growers, too, can't simply pack their fields with more livestock to cover the extra cost of organic production, because of the environmental consequences.

There are also fees to pay. To become certified in New Mexico, for example, growers must pay an annual \$200 application fee plus three-quarters of one percent gross organic sales (there is a small federal cost-share program to help offset these costs) and complete a lengthy application. "It can

seem onerous,” says Joanie Quinn, organic commodities advisor for the New Mexico Department of Agriculture. “But it’s only through that kind of documentation that we can really give consumers the assurance that people are producing organically.”

Separating the Fiber From the Sheep

Here’s where things get wooly. While the NOP has all manner of requirements for food and feed, it doesn’t address what happens once fleece leaves the farm. “The USDA standards are built for food,” explains Connie Karr, processing program manager for Oregon Tilth, an international organic certifier. “The things you would use in wool production aren’t on there.” Soo Kim, who is with the USDA Agricultural Marketing Service Public Affairs Office, elaborates. “In order for a finished textile product such as yarn to be USDA organic, it would have to be certified to the same processing standards that exist for food,” she explains. “A product cannot be processed using prohibited substances and still be labeled USDA organic.”



Sheep from Noon Family Farm in Maine supply the wool for Green Mountain Spinnery’s Maine Organic yarn. Photo by Marti Stone.

Green Mountain Spinnery, which buys USDA-certified organic wool and whose “green” spinning

processes (they scour fleeces with biodegradable soaps and spin with organic canola oil) has been certified to NOP standards by the Northeast Organic Farming Association of Vermont, could conceivably use the USDA logo on its labels, but for the moment, chooses not to. The labels do, however, list the certifying agency. “Our labels were printed before the USDA got into the act with labeling,” explains Margaret Atkinson, the company’s marketing director. “So when we get new ones made, we may change it.”

Color presents another conundrum. Because the USDA didn’t account for textile finishes such as dyes, it left a certification gap from the farm to the finished product. In other words, there was no official USDA sanction for green textile production unless a producer could show that it was finished without using NOP-prohibited substances, most of which related to food.

Enter the Global Organic Textile Standard (GOTS). Established in the mid-2000s, the GOTS provides international textile finishing standards and picks up where the USDA/NOP leaves off. Broadly speaking, the GOTS seeks to minimize waste and water pollution and prohibits the use of heavy metals, synthetic sizing agents, oils that contain heavy metals, chlorine bleach, azo dyes, and other toxic substances in finishing textiles.

A recent memo from the USDA in 2011 finally acknowledged the GOTS, saying that if a textile product is produced in accordance with GOTS it may be sold as organic but may not refer to NOP certification or display the USDA organic seal. It can, however, use the GOTS label. “It’s the same in wool production or banking— without parameters it’s the Wild West,” says Marquadt of the OTA. “That’s why the organic community got together and said, ‘you can’t call just anything organic.’”



Sheep at Thirteen Mile Lamb and Wool. Photo courtesy Thirteen Mile Lamb and Wool.

All of these rules and regulations make yarn labeling a fuzzy proposition at best. Becky Weed, who owns Thirteen Mile Lamb and Wool Co. in Belgrade, Montana, says labeling criteria is knotty even for certifiers. “One year our certifier said we could say, ‘made with organic wool,’ another year the certifier said we could say, ‘made with certified organic wool.’ Even the certifiers are unsure. Frankly, I don’t get too uptight about the bureaucracy as long as I’m transparent.”

When buying organic yarn, certified or not, look for the kind of openness Weed talks about. If the producer can trace the yarn from the ball winder back to the sheep, all the better. “If it doesn’t have the GOTS label, I wouldn’t necessarily think it’s awful,” Quinn says. “I would try to find out more about the product. If it was produced in the Rocky Mountains from organic sheep and processed in a good way, I would snatch it up. Those labels can be a convenience, but it’s important for us as consumers not to be totally lazy, too.”

Is It Good for You Too?

Though many knitters are adamant that organic wool is less irritating, there's no scientific proof that organic wool is softer, better or less allergenic than its non-organic counterpart. Still, many knitters insist that organic wool is easier on babies' skin and can in some cases be worn by people who are normally sensitive to the fiber. Weed, who washes fleeces with a citrus-based scouring agent and uses vegetable-based spinning oils and plant-dyes, says she has customers with chemical sensitivities who have had good luck with her yarns. "They're ecstatic," she says, "because they haven't been able to wear wool for years."



The solar-powered mill at Thirteen Mile Lamb and Wool. Photo courtesy Thirteen Mile Lamb and Wool.

The environmental arguments for organic wool are easier to support, but not without controversy. According to the most recent data available from the OTA, more than 14,000 pounds of insecticides were applied to U.S. sheep in 2000 in the top 22 wool-producing states—pesticides that are toxic at different levels to people, fish, and amphibians. That number doesn't take into account herbicides or chemical fertilizers used on pastureland. Dig a little deeper and you'll find that the "organic" pesticides and herbicides used to produce your cabbage—and Cotswold—aren't so benign, either. So what's a knitter to do? Know your producers, ask questions and realize there's no such thing as perfection.

Cost Benefits

Jocelyn Tunney, president and owner of Tunney Wool Company, which purchased the O-Wool brand from the now-defunct Vermont Organic Fiber Co., says she's happy to be buying organic merino from Australia, even though it adds to the cost of the final product. That's because Australia's organic rules prohibit mulesing, a procedure in which farmers cut pieces of skin from around the sheep's buttocks to prevent flystrike and death. "The mulesing issue is huge for me," she explains. "Most merino is grown in Australia and mulesing is still practiced on a majority of the sheep."

That decision—and any other organic practice—comes at a price, adding cost to the yarn throughout the supply chain. Tunney, whose yarn is spun and processed in the U.S., is quick to admit that point and just as quick to defend it. "[Growers and manufacturers] can't take the cheap route to deal with problems," she explains. "You can't just dip the sheep and spray the land. All of the textile machinery has to be cleaned off in order to run a batch of organic [wool] and the mills have to prepare for that."

"You're paying for people to do things responsibly instead of taking the cheap, easy way out," she continues. "It's better for the farmers and for the people who are wearing the product. That's why it's important to me, and to my mind, it should be important to everybody."

Leslie Petrovski is a freelancer writer who lives in Denver with a husband, two cats and a lot of yarn, some of which is organic. She writes for Vogue Knitting, Yarn Market News, and many other nice, nice people and publications. She adores teaching beginning knitting and blogs at www.nakeidknits.com.