

**Wool 4 Sportswear: Woolmark Workshop**

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Wool Innovation For Sportswear And Activewear

The Woolmark Workshop at IFF 2018 aimed to provide an in-depth look into the unique properties of wool as a natural, renewable and biodegradable fiber suitable for sports and athleisure wear. Rajesh Behl, Consultant, Australian Wool Innovation, started the session with a presentation that outlined the background of the Australian Wool Innovation-which owns The Woolmark Company and why wool is fast emerging as the numero uno choice of sportswear brands around the world. "The Australian Wool Company is owned by about 50,000 wool growers, who are the main share holders. They give us the funds to spend in activities like education, marketing and research and development, both on farm and off farm," he revealed.

50,000 wool growers manage 73 million sheep and gives the world about 325 million kgs of raw wool, which is good enough for about 90 percent of the global consumption of wool for fine suitings, sweaters, sportswear, etc. Of the total production, about 80 percent is exported to China. Around 8 percent comes by volume to India. It has also to be noted that wool constitutes about 1.2 percent of the total consumption of fibers in the world, by volume.

Bahl showcased a video outlining the properties and salient features of the wool fiber and its benefits, and how the industry utilises these benefits to shell out unique and innovative products to the consumer. Wool is a all season fiber that is natural biodegradable and renewable, and is extremely soft, elastic, breathable, static resistant, stain resistant, anti wrinkle, odour resistant, UV resistant, has extreme moisture management properties, et al. Wool bedding and sleepwear appear to promote a better night's sleep, and fine wool knitwear can assist people that suffer from particular types of skin conditions. Wool can also be used in its pure form or mixed with other natural fibers like cashmere, camel hair, Angora or synthetic fibers and is hence increasingly being used for apparel, interior wares and other products today.

Wool is an all season fiber and the fact that it is made of the same protein which our body hair are made of rebuffs the general assumption that wool can be prickly. "It's just the choice and composition of the finer in the product that makes it prickly. A micron lesser than 18 can very well be used for next to skin garments. Brands like Icebreaker are making women's underwear from wool. Sportswear majors like Under Armour also is increasingly turning to wool to make next to skin garment," he added.

Wool's moisture management property is one of the foremost reasons why it has now been increasingly used by sportswear brands. Coupled with other benefits like breathability, odour management and comfort it has emerged as one of the most appropriate fiber for sports wear. Wool also is a durable fiber; although not very strong, it is highly extensible fiber. Whenever there is a stress or strain, the fiber extends itself which passes on the stress and strain to the next point, and the process goes on preventing the fabric from tearing.

"Another mountaineering brand has used three layers of wool. There is the base layer next to skin followed by the mid layer and outer layer which forms a sound arrangement that seamlessly retains body temperature, lets perspiration to go through and resists wind and rain. In another technological innovation, the fiber was stretched by more than 30 percent, open weaved and after it comes out of the finishing bath, it is allowed to relax. When that fabric relaxes, it contracts by 30 percent and an additional 10 percent contraction takes place because of its open weave construction. The end result is a fabric that doesn't let either rain or air to penetrate but the fabric is highly breathable and machine washable without chemical treatment," Bahl expressed.

Sportswear Partnership

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The momentum of brands choosing wool in performance apparel is gradually gaining pace. An indication of the degree to which wool is now appreciated by the outdoor and sports trade is evident by the name of brands that have partnered with The Woolmark Company. "We have created a slew of products with adidas. We have seamless half zipped sweaters (in collaboration with Stoll, men's and women's wool blended running shirts and ultra boost shoe is wool," he added. Other brands that have partnered with The Woolmark Company include, Stone Island, Woolrich, Devold, super. natural, Helly Hansen, et all. "This is just to give you an idea about how wool is being adopted by more and more sportswear brands around the globe," Bahl concluded.

#### Commercialisation of Wool

Jaspreet Chandok, VP and Head - Fashion, IMG Reliance, took the stage next, to brief the congregation a retailers perspective on why a product should be adopted. "Retailers today are looking at how they can differentiate; ultimately the only measure of your success is your profit. There are various ways to create a differentiation - from a brand perspective, through retail experiences, and most importantly, through your products. The product is the most important aspect, especially today with thousands of options available, and it is imperative for any retailer to create a product that can differentiate," he added.

From a retailers perspective, the fact that wool can provide the value in the product itself is a big plus -- it lets the retailer to up sell the product and premiumise it. "If you can add value to a product by innovations in the fabric, that makes all the difference for a fashion retailer-the sales per square feet go up and the consumer has better chances of coming back. My opinion is that the luxury segment is already acquainted with the edges of wool as a beneficial fabric. The tipping point for wool is in the premium segment, and this is where the volume is. If you can provide products in this segment whose value outpaces the price it will make a huge difference. Another reason of our association with The Woolmark Company is the sustainability credentials. While there is sustainability from the fiber's perspective there also is work that needs to be done towards, promoting it, taking care of all the stake holders in the value chain," he add.

To a retailer, summarized Jaspreet Chandok, it's genuinely a business imperative to create value for the consumer, who will create value for the organisation.

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