



# Economic and Social Council

Distr.: General  
4 September 2014

Original: English

## Economic Commission for Europe

### Committee on Forests and the Forest Industry

#### Seventy-second session

Kazan, 18-21 November 2014

Item 2d of the provisional agenda

#### The Forest Sector in a Green Economy

### Forests for Fashion Initiative

#### Note by the secretariat

##### *Summary*

This document summarizes the background and outcome of the “Forests for Fashion – Fashion for Forests” event, which was organized at the International Day of Forests, 21 March 2014, and presents the highlights of, “Innovative wood-based products: Textiles” (UNECE/FAO Forest Products Annual Market Review 2013-2014), which further discusses the challenges and possibilities of sustainable fibres.

The Committee is expected to comment on the Forests for Fashion Initiative and share ideas on how to create alliances to promote sustainable wood-based fibers jointly with the Fashion Industry.

## I. Fibre Markets and Sustainability

1. Awareness of the environmental impacts of different fibres is low among the general public: for example, many people think cotton is a “green” fibre because it is “natural”. The popularity of fibres has tended to be inversely proportional to their sustainability.
2. At present, modern wood-derived fibres represent the only potential source of sustainable clothing. With likely future limitations on the supply of fossil-fuel-derived oils for the production of synthetic fibres, the environmental downsides of cotton, and a lack of other viable alternatives (for example, hemp and soya currently constitute only a tiny proportion of world fibre supply), dissolved-pulp fibres offer the greatest hope for a sustainable clothing material sufficient to meet global needs.
3. Synthetic fibres, which are made from fossil fuels using environmentally damaging processes, are the most popular fibres worldwide. The second most popular fibre, cotton, is grown in very large monocultures and is a major user of

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pesticides, which can be environmentally damaging. Cotton production and processing also involves the consumption of large quantities of fresh water, an increasingly scarce resource. Viscose, a wood-derived fibre, occupies the third place in the global fibre market. Some of the newer wood-derived fibres could be described as “greener” alternatives to viscose, but their share in the market place is still low.

4. Viscose, a wood-derived fibre, comprises 6% of the global fibre market. It occupies third place in that market, after synthetics and cotton and ahead of wool. While traditional viscose has many environmental flaws, modern wood based fibres can be considered as the most sustainable of the world’s four most commonly produced fibres. The sustainability credentials of wood-derived fibres are further enhanced by “wet modulus” and other new forms of viscose, which have relatively green production systems, as well as by the development of less-damaging “closed loop” production systems for existing wood-derived fibres.

5. More than 90% of wood-derived fibres are produced outside the UNECE region (primarily in Asia), although much of this production is in European-owned factories. Wood-derived fibres are a close substitute for cotton: the frequent cotton crop failures from 2004 to 2012 led to record price increases for wood-derived fibres as well as substantial investment in new manufacturing capacity.

6. Several researchers theorize that a “cotton peak” may already have been reached, in which case the production of wood-derived fibres may grow significantly in order to meet increasing demand for naturally derived skin- and environmentally-friendly fabrics. In addition, cotton prices may rise in the long term because of conflicts over water use, insecticides and the need to preserve productive land for the away from cultivation of food crops, which have already led to export restrictions in India and Pakistan, two of the largest cotton-producing countries. Innovation in wood-derived fibres is also improving the outlook for their use.

7. However, the environmental footprint of a garment is composed of the full life cycle of the garment production, where fibres present only one component.

## **II. Forests for Fashion Event, 21 March 2014**

8. To promote an unambiguous message of sustainability, vertical alliances are needed with production and finishing companies that are also aiming to reduce the ecological footprints of their products. For this purpose, the UNECE/FAO Forestry and Timber Section organized the “Forests for Fashion” event in Geneva, Switzerland, in March 2014. This event gathered producers, researchers and journalists and showcased wood-derived fabrics in an innovative display.

9. This event was organized jointly by the Italian Permanent Missions to the UN and others, the Swiss Government and the UNECE-FAO Forestry and Timber Section, to foster dialogue between the forest and fashion industries. It consisted of art events and installations by the renowned artist Michelangelo Pistoletto, a conference with presentations by several experts, as well as producers, critics and commentators such as Xenya Cherny-Scanlon, Special Adviser to the Director General, International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN), Rossella Ravagli, Gucci’s Corporate Social and Environmental Responsibility manager, and Mario Boselli, President of the Italian Chamber of Fashion.

10. The day concluded with an innovative Fashion show, highlighting environmentally friendly fabrics in garments produced by international designers. The event was a hugely successful exchange of information and strategies between

people with a great commitment to creating an environmentally friendly fashion and clothing industry.

### **III. Conclusions and Recommendations**

11. A large number of “green” fibres, including viscose, are vastly superior to cotton and synthetics in terms of their environmental impacts.

12. The production of clothing involves a much longer process than is common in the forest sector: the fibre must be produced; woven; put through a variety of finishings to make it suitable to be worn next to the skin; dyed; and sewn into a garment. The environmental credentials of the raw fibre are an important consideration, but a “green” fibre does not necessarily equate to a “green” garment.

13. Forestry is a small player in the huge fashion and fabrics industry. To increase the use of sustainable fibres, it may be necessary to make alliances with other producers, such as the manufacturers of organic cotton, hemp and bamboo-derived fibres. While these producers could be seen as competitors, their situation is similar to that of the wood-derived fabric industry, and they would benefit more from taking some of the market share of synthetics and commercial cotton than from fighting over the tiny market share they currently have. A united “green fabric” front, using the publicity generated by some of the newer fabrics, could make a greater impact than any one industry campaigning alone.

14. A variety of alliances could be put to good effect in promoting sustainable wood-derived fibres by creating recognizable labelling – a “green passport” for garments – showing how every stage in the process meets a certain standard. In addition to environmental credentials, such labelling would need to take into account other issues, such as those associated with labour protection. Several green labels are under development, but the general public is wary of potential “greenwashing”. Therefore, the fashion industry should work together with the forest sector to create a single, identifiable green passport that guarantees that each step of a garment’s production has met a measurable sustainability standard. The Committee is invited to discuss how the forest sector could promote a wider use of forest-based sustainable fibres in the context of a green economy.

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