



TEXTILKOMPASSEN
TEKSTILKOMPASSET

The Textile Compass explores the fiber assessment landscape

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A two-hour long webinar explored the emerging landscape of fiber assessments, which today are mainly LCA-based and with results that seem counter-intuitive to most.

The newly initiated Interreg project, the Textile Compass (Textilkompassen/Tekstilkompasset) which is co-financed by Interreg Sweden–Norway, Region Jämtland Härjedalen and Trøndelag County Council; and is a cooperation between the Norwegian Nord University and Sweden's Mitt University, and Fibershed Norway and IUC Jämtland Härjedalen.

As this was in many ways the project's first open invitation to discuss the way forward and in which direction the compass should be pointing, we had invited in experts on fiber assessment tools to inform us on the short-comings and the opportunities in this landscape. How we assess the environmental impacts of textile fibers matters – not only for how different materials are understood, but ultimately for the choices made by industry, policymakers, public procurement and consumers. This webinar thus sought to open an honest and exploratory conversation around the methods and assumptions shaping these assessments today.

We asked: How well do existing approaches such as LCA and PEFCR reflect real-world impacts? How are evolving European assessment frameworks shaping the way textile fibers are understood and compared? What falls within, and outside, their current parameters? And how might we better account for the complexity of different fiber systems, including both their negative impacts and their potential to contribute positively to ecological systems?

Åsa Strandberg was our first speaker, she had the idea for the Textile Compass, and she shared her journey from H&M and into academia – and especially her view of how timelines are not considered when assessing fibers. Her awakening had been when comparing cotton and viscose, where long the fibers need to regenerate was not considered in the equation. If one further draws this to synthetics, the time-line is quite mind-boggling. Also, how much biomass is accumulated and what LCAs leave out in the journey from seed to fiber. "Time changes the picture completely," was Åsa's take-away. Alongside the need to zoom out and see the whole system, not just the isolated parts.

Dr. Paul Swan, technical advisor to IWTO, was next out from a farm in Australia where they were studying the carbon cycling in the soil. He spoke about how LCAs are 'damage accounting', and only capture what damage is done, no positive impacts or services. In the current LCAs for wool, the largest imprints are from carbon emissions and the land-use efficiency (which of course is rather low for sheep grazing on vast land. Just about here we lost Paul (in the wilds of Australia) and Ove Jakobsen, Professor emeritus from Nord University stepped in and spoke about ecological economics, and the identification that "the system is the problem". Ecological economics questions 'why growth?', 'why competition?' and 'why markets?' are given and Ove showed his Iceberg model, which has led him to organic thinking and a qualitative development for the common good. This leads to a change of the context, and the tension that must be between ideology and utopia. This is something we really must explore further, as synthetics have no place in a society where the common good is completely non-toxic, does not shed microplastics and brings life.

When Paul came back, he expounded on this point, and ended his talk with the big question of if a fiber or material is actually food for a next life or not: Can it degrade and be returned to the soil or not? He did delve heavily into the new science of carbon cycling and biogenic carbon, and for anyone who wants to understand this better, the IWTO has published the Green Book which thoroughly explores this. The result is that the LCAs for wool show completely different impacts if biogenic carbon and nature's carbon-cycling are accounted for as opposed to the carbon-emissions from fossil fuels that add to the increasing load of GHG emissions that are related to our human activities and have nothing to do with the animals' millions of years' methane contribution. We all got how unfair it is to

blame the animals in the equation, even if we didn't understand how much ends up in urine, manure, respiration and other places.

When we opened up the floor for discussion, issues around how complex LCAs are and how they, at the hands of those who do not know what is inside the 'black box' potentially cause more havoc than they are helpful. The question also arose if the conundrum of LCAs actually can be solved. The question was addressed to Paul, who admitted that the structural flaws are huge and the results perverse, and that a simplified sequencing of questions could perhaps be more helpful: is the material toxic? Is it biodegradable? Is it designed for a safe EoL? For reuse?

And that LCAs is a system that appeals to accountants, perhaps not to the general public. LCAs just may be a house built on sand, however, as the EU is implementing policy fast and furious with PEF underpinning some of the directives and regulations, we must deal with the issues at hand.

The discussion then brought up the science around 'permanent' and short term carbon removal, where Paul again stressed that carbon is actually food for life. How planting forests hasn't saved us, as wild fires are happening all over the world, and the same trees are burning down adding to carbon-emissions. So no quick fixes there.

"We are not seeing the woods for the trees."

We also had an intervention from someone who had just returned from Mongolia, and here the mantra was 'more and heavier is better', when we all know the opposite is what will help Mother Earth. LCAs be damned.

The second half of the webinar introduced Henrik Haller's idea of a binary tool based on the Jacquard weaving technology, which eventually gave IBM the grounds for developing the first computers. Could this be the basis for a decision tree? This would then be a transparent adjustable and interactive tool. The discussion was opened up afterwards, and many had opinions on if such a simplification was too simple, if the inter-dependencies in the textile value-chains just wouldn't be captured and therefore in a way undermined. It was also questioned that the focus is too much on fibers, rather than the arguably more toxic and problematic manufacturing stages (as pointed out by EU's Joint Research Center as well), and that looking more downstream than upstream would be more productive. Åsa pointed out that the Textile Compass has its raison d'être in fiber formation, and that others need to keep tabs on the other life-cycle stages.

Federico Brugnoli, SPIN360 was the last speaker, and he explained how they have mainly worked with leather, and are expanding to other fibers and materials, and will be launching the House of Natural Materials in Brussels shortly where the issues around LCAs will hold center stage. He described their work with a more hybrid approach, and as he ended his presentation, he also described the allocation conundrum, where fossil-fuel based materials allocate on energy output, which is why nothing from the fiber formation stage is allocated to synthetic fibers!

So... in an attempt to level the playing field, SPIN360 is addressing this, and other unfairnesses – which as he said – should be straight forward – but isn't.

The floor was once again opened up.

The discussion evolved around resale value, which had already been brought up. This is important, as synthetics do not 'fetch in' a good price. There was also a good conversation on the place for non-renewables in a circular economy (Ove would beg to differ that it isn't within a circular economy, it's a circular society!). How useful fibers are for their purpose rather than playing the numbers game, was brought into the conversation, Will durability/quality affect the functional unit? Some believe this. A quote from Churchill was put forward: "I only use numbers I have manipulated myself". This alongside

how local contexts are so different that there is no generalizing that can be done. And finally: the price of all products has to be drastically increased to capture the actual damage and eco-modulation. The discussion also brought up the question of cost down to farm level. Demonstrating that a production system is sustainable, or providing the evidence needed to challenge a negative assessment can require costly verification, that on top of all other costs leaves farmers carrying a significant burden of proof: a situation described in the discussion as being “guilty until proven innocent”.

The defensive nature of the natural fibers was also brought up. As new data emerges, the synthetics are losing by the hour, it was contended. We had already shown the results from the Norwegian brand Bergans and their work with evaluating a Merino wool sweater in Glimpact, in Ecobalyse and in JRC’s new suggested Environmental Footprint or Carbon Footprint. The results are simply mind-boggling.

After our two hours, we were left with some important questions:

- How can we compare materials without stripping away their context?
- And at the same time- how can we ensure comparable scrutiny across fundamentally different production systems (harmonization)?
- How can assessment become more comprehensive without becoming unusably complex?

At the very end, the radio silence from the EU was discussed. This can be an advantage for the Textile Compass. We just don’t know.