

Sustainable Fibre Strategies



Company: Bonobo

Project: ECAP

Sector: Apparel and Textiles

Market Share: 0.15%

Highlights:

- Aim to use 100% eco-friendly cotton (inc. BCI, CMIA recycled and organic cotton) by 2022.
- Aim to use only recycled polyester by 2024, with more targets to be defined as part of our overarching 2024 sustainability strategy.
- 'Instinct' now equates to between 25% and 30% of the total Bonobo range.
- On men's and women's denim jeans, cotton is almost 90% eco-friendly and across all our product ranges we have achieved almost 80% eco-friendly cotton. "

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Ambition

What was your motivation to start sourcing more sustainable fibres and, as part of that, join ECAP?

Bonobo is a sustainable brand with many commitments including sustainable fibres. However, we needed to understand further the environmental impact of fibres. Joining ECAP enabled us to gain knowledge and clear information in order to better understand sustainable fibres. We were also keen to join because it was an EU programme, with other brands taking part, and gave us the opportunity to communicate our involvement - as a brand contributing towards an improving the wider fashion industry.

What impact are you aiming to achieve through your sustainable fibre strategy?

Through our strategy, we are aiming to reduce our water footprint and achieve water savings. We are still defining the specific targets to be set in relation to water, and also recognize the need to set additional targets relating to carbon footprint and toxicity.

Our last fibre footprint through ECAP showed a water reduction of 20% by using more sustainable fibres but further reductions can be achieved through other actions, too.

What are your targets and priorities in relation to more sustainable fibres?

- Primarily, we are a denim brand using a lot of cotton (~2/3 of our fibre mix) so we have targeted our conventional cotton use and aim to use 100% eco-friendly cotton (inc. BCI, CMAA recycled and organic cotton) by 2022.
- Thanks to the ECAP analysis, we defined criteria for sustainable fibre use for our entire 'Instinct' range. We set a minimum threshold of 50% 'eco-friendly' fibres per product which can include organic fibres, Tencel with FSC certification, linen and recycled fibres. We support this range with special labels to communicate to customers why these fibres are better for the environment.
- Aim to use only recycled polyester by 2024, with more targets to be defined as part of our overarching 2024 sustainability strategy.

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Mehdi EL-KHALIFI, R&D Project Manager,
Bonobo

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Achievements and Learnings

Key achievements or breakthroughs celebrated so far on your journey to source fibres more sustainably?

- The ECAP fibre footprint provided evidence of what we have achieved in terms of our water and carbon savings and helped us to communicate internally about the results of our efforts. We find it has been easier to speak about water and carbon rather than the technical differences of the fibres.
- The footprint breakdown has been very useful to show our progress on more sustainable fibres. On men's and women's denim jeans, cotton is almost 90% eco-friendly and across all our product ranges we have achieved almost 80% eco-friendly cotton.
- 'Instinct' now equates to between 25% and 30% of the total Bonobo range.
- Beyond fibres, the idea of measuring impact has also driven us in other textile processes, such as washing, dyeing and so on.

Main challenges faced whilst trying to switch to more sustainable fibres?

- The biggest challenge relates to recycled fibres, because use is so dependent on the product type e.g. if its cotton or denim, 30% can be difficult to achieve. We have had many issues relating to recycled fibres, as the touch was not so soft or the fibres not so strong as conventional equivalents. For polyester products it is easier.
- In France, consumers are not used to recycled fibres within garments, so if not soft enough to what they are used to, they will not buy them. They are not aware of the effort and the work behind the product. This relates to the need for topline consumer communication and engagement on these newer fibre types.
- Price is a challenge for some fibre options such as organic and Tencel fibres.

To overcome these, we focus on suppliers that can offer blends that meet our needs, in terms of touch and softness, and commercial and sustainability parameters. However this means the pool of suppliers is small for certain product categories.

Key learnings as a result of being part of the ECAP programme?

- The insight gained through the ECAP fibre footprint and the resources provided have been very beneficial for our learning - to understand where we are starting from, where the impacts are within our collections, how to track progress, and enabled us to share this progress through a collaborative effort.
- The reports show precise improvements which are motivational for our teams and they prove that we must monitor what we are doing so we don't lose momentum.

If you were starting your sustainable fibre sourcing journey again, what would you do differently?

We had to make some mistakes to really know what is good and not so good and to improve with our suppliers and other partners. The experience itself has been key.

We started very optimistically on our sustainable product strategy, on aspects such as recycled fibres. Having to deal with suppliers who did not have all the background information they needed was very challenging and frustrating where quality and other parameters were not fulfilled. Although challenging, this has been positive overall as we can now identify our key suppliers and master material suppliers.

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Were there any surprising outcomes that you were not expecting, for example, in your wider business operations, amongst customers or within your supply chain?

- We discovered our vendors (salespeople in our stores) are very curious about the latest sustainable products and fibres we are using.
- We have also conducted research to better understand how our customers will invest in sustainability which has been useful.
- A lot of suppliers who were not offering recycled fibres, have now started as a result of us engaging them, and they are now able to offer these same fibres and materials to other brands and retailers, so they have benefited commercially too.
- We also have discovered that with clear targets, and large overview of fibres impacts we can go far and fast! This was very exciting and challenging!
- Communication was also something surprising; achieving the right balance between talking about the recycled element as well as the commercial and qualitative.

For others not yet sourcing more sustainable fibres, have you any advice for them regarding how they can get started on the topic and what steps they can take in the early days of their journey to source more sustainable fibre?

- One of the most important things is to set up targets, that are critical and relevant for our industry, regarding the type of material they are using. This allows brands/retailers to stay focused with a clear direction.

- Have a dedicated team or department for sustainability and sustainable products to really push the topic forward. It is important is to convey knowledge and best practices, through eco-designed, sustainably produced garments.
- From our experience, we know that many of our suppliers already have a lot of news about sustainability and are developing sustainable products but if we do not ask clearly for these, they do not talk about them or offer them to us. Clear communication is critical with the supply base to highlight your ambitions and what you want. They are starting to understand how being proactive is commercially beneficial for them, too.
- Keep informed about new sustainable products not only via suppliers but via the media, other brands and reading CSR reports to help you understand what is possible and to inform your own strategy.

What barriers from your perspective exist today in order for the textile sector to move to a more circular fibre system?

- Consumer awareness of recycled fibres, the technologies and efforts that sit behind them as well as other sustainable fibres such as organic cotton.
- The market prices regarding more sustainable fibres, as this is still a growing proportion of the market so prices are currently high.
- In France, we want to raise awareness of the need for more closed loop systems. We have collection boxes now in place in our stores so customers can put old garments in the box to receive a 5euro voucher to use against a new item. This is a key focus for Bonobo and also the other brands within our Group, in order to reach many more customers. We aim to recycle the products to produce new fibres for spinning in the next 3-5 years as systems improve.

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What's next for you? What are you working on in 2019/20?

- Our water savings goal for Bonobo will be a main KPI in future.
- Focusing on other fibres beyond cotton that we source in smaller volumes, such as recycled polyester.
- We will focus on transforming all our basics and essentials range to meet the criteria of our 'Instinct' range. This represents almost 70-80% of our total volume. This will be the step forward to meet our global targets for transforming all to 'Instinct' by 2024.
- Expanding our clothing collections system.
- Integrating more sustainable washing technologies (laser and ozone etc.) and more sustainable finishing techniques, including printing and dyeing to reduce the impacts associated with these stages.



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Project supported by LIFE funding

ECAP is €3.6 million EU LIFE funded project which aims to reduce clothing waste across Europe and embed a circular economy approach.

ECAP mission

Cutting the environmental impact of clothing across the supply chain. Generating value for business through collaboration, measuring and sharing best practice

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Case studies were generated as a result of pilots carried out for ECAP by WRAP and the named organisations from 2016 to 2019.