



# A Toolkit for Fibersheds & Brands:

## Creating a Conversation for a New Era of Design



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FIBERSHED

Local Fiber, Local Dye, Local Labor

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**Cover:** garment photos, left to right: Mara Hoffman, Wol Hide x NY Textile Lab, Mara Hoffman;  
photos of cotton in the field and sheep grazing by Paige Green

# Intro

When we first decided to write this toolkit, apparel brands' interest in working with fibersheds was already picking up—but throw in a worldwide pandemic? The upwards spike in brand interest has been incredible. Why is that?

In early 2020, as the pandemic started to take root, global textile supply chains started to break apart. Large U.S. brands sourcing from other countries saw a major disruption in goods getting to them on time, and they saw how volatile the market was while in lockdown.

We watched the #payup and #payher campaigns launch, forcing fashion brands like Gap, Zara, C&A, and Primark to hold up their end of the bargain to pay garment workers \$22 billion in lost wages, and we watched what one tanker stuck in the Suez Canal, overloaded with shipping crates, could do to our food and fiber supply chains. It wasn't pretty.

And when it comes to the current state of human rights and traceability? According to the Clean Clothes Campaign, “China is busy continuing its regime of repression, exploitation and genocide” with cotton garments tainted by Uyghur forced labour.<sup>1</sup> Marc Bain of the online business magazine Quartz notes that the labor-rights watchdog Worker Rights Consortium (WRC) “estimates U.S. brands and retailers import more than 1.5 billion garments containing materials from Xinjiang annually, representing more than \$20 billion in retail sales.”<sup>2</sup>

As TS Designs' President Eric Henry told us, “What we learned from COVID-19 is how much resiliency we need in order to move forward.”

**Indeed.**

<sup>1</sup> [cleanclothes.org/campaigns/end-uyghur-forced-labour](https://cleanclothes.org/campaigns/end-uyghur-forced-labour)

<sup>2</sup> <https://qz.com/1956856/the-us-has-issued-a-sweeping-ban-on-cotton-from-chinas-xinjiang/>

Let's take a deep breath and realize that it's time to take baby steps to be more effective environmentally and socially, and to encourage better traceability and accountability. Or, as New York Textile Lab Founder Laura Sansone says, “We need to use a lateral growth logic that grows the way natural systems grow . . . we need to design and think the way roots grow.”

Fibersheds nationwide are proving to be ideal test grounds for this type of growth. In any given region, elements of the textile supply chain could include fiber farming across wool, cotton, flax, and hemp; small-scale regional processing facilities like spinning or weaving mills; and a boom in regional natural dye production. As the number of Fibershed Affiliates grows across the U.S. and across the world, relationships have emerged between designers, brands, and fibersheds who want to work together.

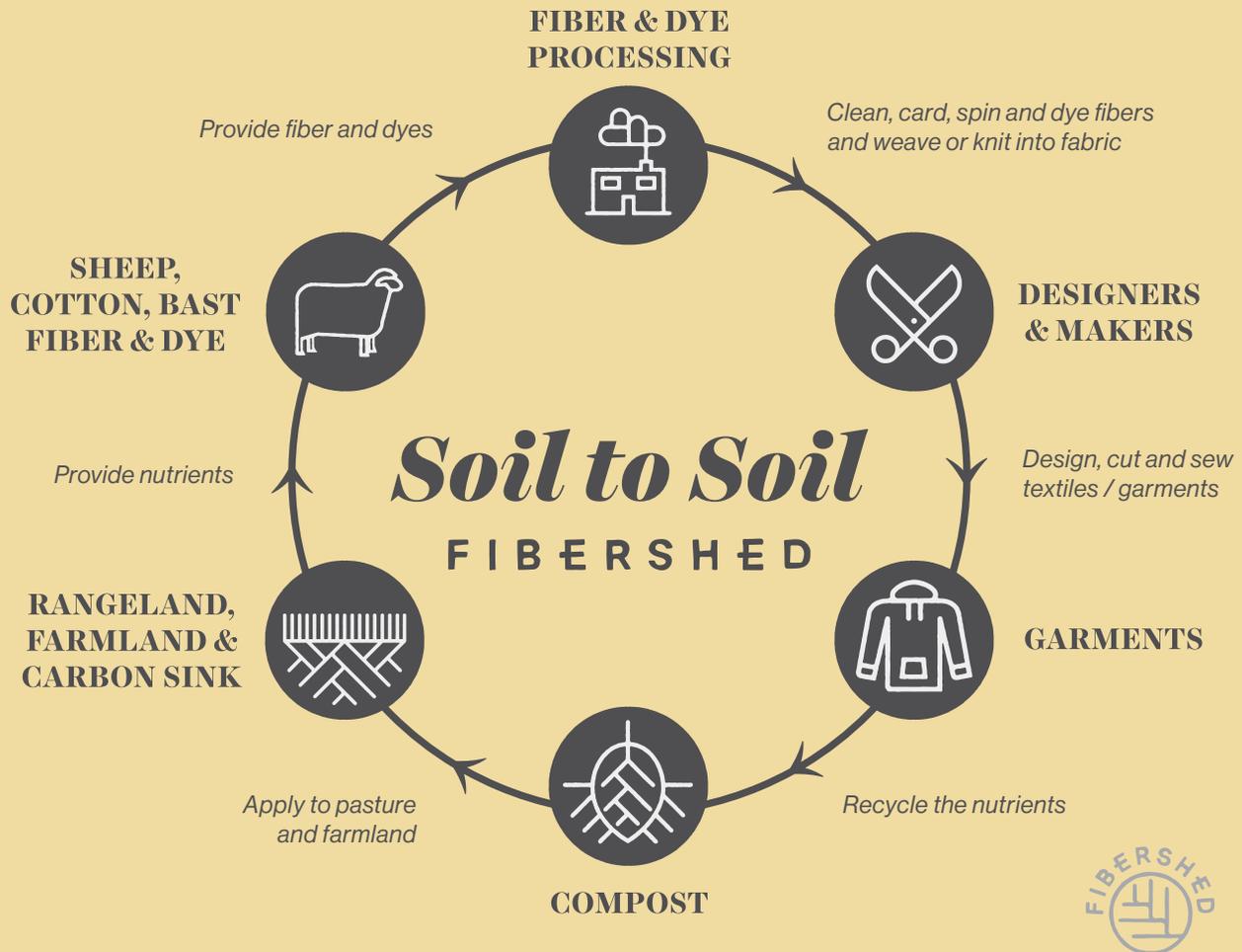
However, as our interviewees—including Fibershed Affiliates, designers, and large and small brands—reveal, not everyone understands how to bridge the old fashion industry with the new. What's missing? The tools and framework for fibersheds, designers, and brands to use.

**We hope this toolkit fills that gap.**



# Why this toolkit?

Let's begin at the real beginning, a place where we develop a new language about (and a reacquaintance with) older systems that we can make new. Yes, the beginning. If we are to create textiles within a framework of ecological balance, we will have to create from a very old place—an honest place where design for decomposition leads, and ego and profit take a back seat.



**Sounds crazy, right?** Well, imagine if using a toolkit like this actually helped you, the resource-ready fibershed, or you, the sustainability team leader at a fashion brand, introduce something so exciting and complex that it rejuvenated a team to create. Imagine pushing yourself a little harder to think about how creating a new supply chain system could actually nourish a community through the production of a t-shirt or a building material made from fiber. It's truly a new frontier for imagining and creating.

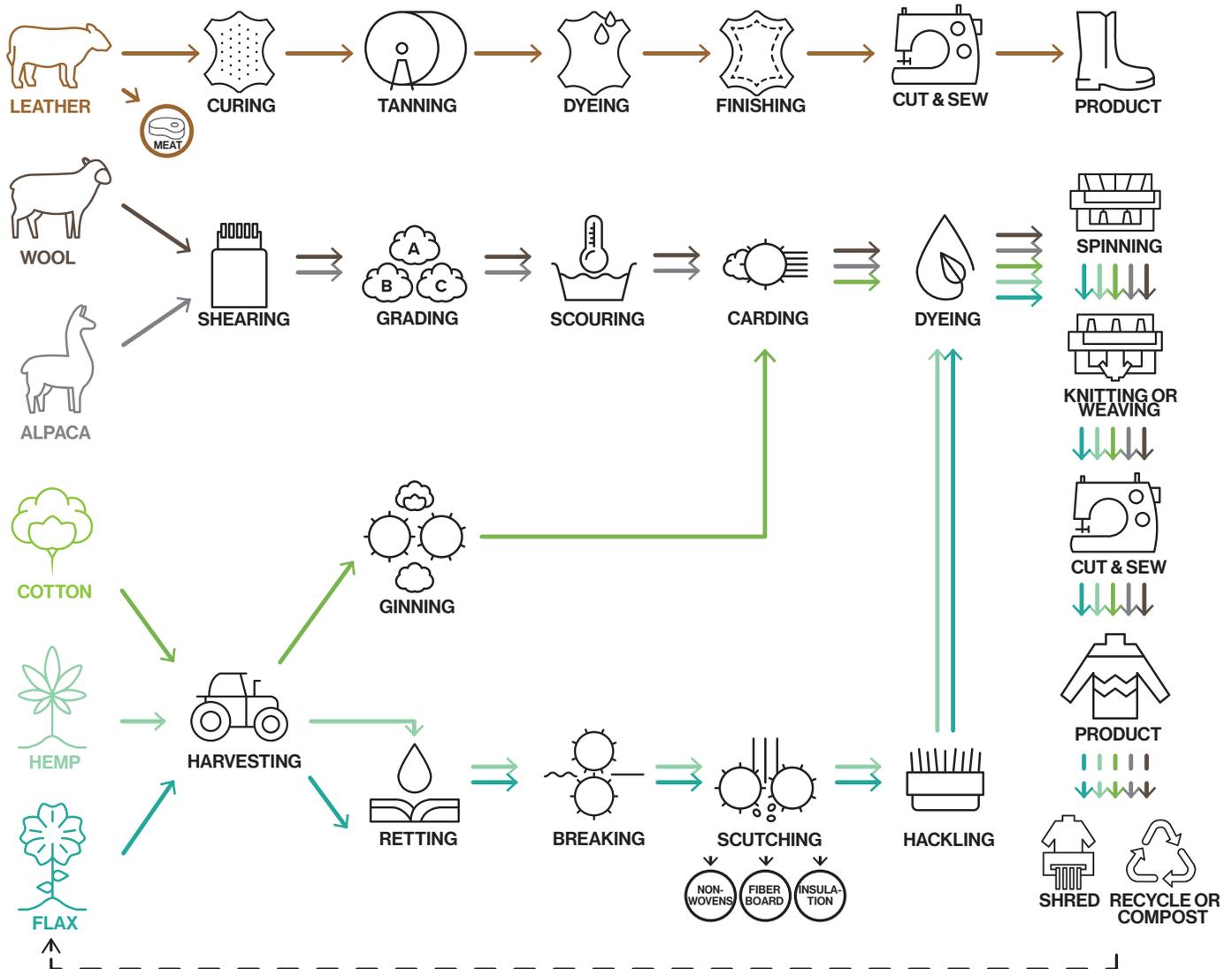
Because we are so steeped in habit, this toolkit will be the guardrail to help avoid repeating mistakes that we've seen brands and fibersheds—through being a little too excited or a little too driven by marketing—make over and over.

The eight organizations we've interviewed share key lessons about rebuilding U.S. fiber infrastructure and set the stage for brands and fibersheds to do the right work. The good work. With more brands coming to fibersheds, both parties need to understand where the other is coming from and work to build alliances with more than just a handshake. (That's one old-fashioned way of doing things we're not going to entertain anymore.)

As President of TS Designs Eric Henry says, "The farmer has zero say in the price of a product, and that's the most basic thing we have to fix in agriculture. The farmer has to have a voice and has to make a living. They are the most important part of the conversation!"

And with the farmer first up to bat, the rest of the supply chain needs to be equally healthy to make it a strong team. We'll dig into all of this. Settle in.

## THE FIBER SUPPLY CHAIN



Source: *The Fibers Roadmap: Integrated Capital Opportunities to Support Revitalization of U.S.-Grown Fiber, Textiles, and Leather*. Sustainable Agriculture and Food Systems Funders (SAFSF), 2020. Design: Rebekah Miel, Miel Design

[www.agandfoodfunders.org/featured-work/sustainable-fibers-and-textiles/fibers-roadmap](http://www.agandfoodfunders.org/featured-work/sustainable-fibers-and-textiles/fibers-roadmap)

# So you are a fibershed?

Among the 50+ Fibershed Affiliate members currently registered with Fibershed, the diversity and complexity of each group's mission is truly inspiring. Not everyone wants to work with a brand, but what if a brand comes to you asking, for example, for yarn for a capsule collection of sweaters or fabric for a small run of scarves or hats?

Do you turn them away? Or do you help educate them and connect the dots?

The first question you will have to ask your team is "Why?" Why is it important to you to dedicate your precious time and energy to this brand's inquiry? Will working with this brand support what you are working on or detract from your mission? Why IS this important?



This toolkit will give you plenty of information to help you answer these key questions. If you answer that working with a brand to show them, as well as your team, the positive benefits of working regionally is worth it, we'll share lots of info to help you have a successful partnership. If you're not at that stage yet, but just want to better understand the pros and cons of working with a brand, read on.



Photos by (clockwise from top): Darcy Fabre, Acadiana Fibershed; Gamine; Wol Hide x NY Textile Lab



Flax fields in Oregon in the Pacific Northwest Fibershed region  
(Photos by John Morgan of StereoEye Productions)

## What roles can a fibershed play?

**We asked fibersheds** about their negotiating skills and their industry know-how, what they see as opportunities, difficult questions and barriers to working with a brand, as well as what success might look like.

As Co-Founder of the Pacific Northwest Fibershed and Fibrevolution (bast fiber producers revitalizing linen in the Pacific Northwest), Shannon Welsh tells us, “We’ve had brands from all over the world reaching out to us—because they can’t get flax fiber right now. They ask ‘Are you close to making linen fabric?’ And we say ‘No, but you could help us!’” In the Pacific Northwest Fibershed’s case, they are seeking support of \$250,000 for harvesting equipment that would help them provide more brands with U.S. flax.

***“It’s always the farmers who have the most risk, and it’s always the investors who are talking about risk, risk, risk. There’s a lot of interest, but we don’t ever get the feeling they are going to step up and pay for infrastructure.”***  
– Shannon Welsh



Illustration by Anna Brones

Shannon says that in addition to legal documents and a mutual understanding of the entire project, fibersheds need to be better prepared legally for scaling the work they are doing.

Founder of the Acadiana Fibershed in Southwest Louisiana Sharon Donnan says, “What we encountered was a company only working with genetically modified seed, and when my farmers heard this and realized there was a big connection to the largest chemical producer in the world, it was *adios*.” A fibershed can play an important role in helping farmers make sure they don’t get taken advantage of, helping provide some level of protection on that first phone call.

TS Designs’ Eric Henry says brands in general have a tendency to dictate what they want and not understand what they are asking in terms of pricing and timeline. He says that oftentimes they come from a design background and don’t understand the farming side at all. A fibershed and a brand have to build together. As Eric puts it, “A small fibershed wants to sell the fiber, and they get excited, but they get caught in a trap where they overcommit and under-deliver. It’s tough to say no when you have an opportunity to get yourself into the spotlight.”

## What's your role going to be?

- *You can be a broker and act as an intermediary.*
- *You can be a connector who offers a vetted supply chain.*
- *You can be a consultant and manage the entire project.*
- *You can find grant money to help your fibershed scale a project.*



Another way to think about your role is to ask whether you are going to act as a fibershed or as a producer in the fibershed. Fibersheds can act as a house (or a shed) for those producers in a region and help to reconnect, if you're a lucky fibershed, an entire supply chain system—from the farmer to all the processing involved in making a fiber into a finished product.

Krystle Moody Wood, Founder of Materevolve (a sustainable textiles consultancy building regenerative textiles systems), was instrumental in developing Fibershed's Backyard Program at The North Face with regional Fibershed fibers. She reminds us that in a negotiation with a brand, fibersheds and fiber producers are two totally different things. As she puts it, "We need to spell out the pathway for fibersheds to negotiate on behalf of producers vs. having producers negotiating directly."

# What does working with a brand look like?

**Dana Davis**, VP of Sustainability, Product and Business Strategy at Mara Hoffman, tells us, “At the beginning of the pandemic, I really started diving more into how do we grow our U.S. supply chain—outside of just what we do as far as cut and sew. And I’d always wanted to do something with Climate Beneficial™ yarn.”

Founder of Gamine Taylor Johnston says, “I’ve had this long-standing interest in making things that are no longer made here [domestically] with workwear clothing, and the idea of a regionally-made vest was floating around in my head for a while.”

In both cases—Mara Hoffman, a large, contemporary womenswear brand, and Gamine, a smaller, artisan line of women’s workwear—brand leaders saw the opportunity to produce something regional or U.S.-made as an important part of their brand.

## **This sounds exciting, right?**

What we’ve found is that excitement about a local project often trumps thinking logically. We make decisions that might waste a lot of people’s time doing research on the supply chain, making

samples for free, spinning yarn that the team will never get reimbursed for, or growing a crop without a contract (**See Appendix for sample contract**) and then getting stuck with it. We’ve seen all of these things happen.

## **Our best advice? Research a brand before you even get on a call with them.**

You want to be informed and ready for brands as much as they are ready for you. And when you are on that call, hear them out. This is their first time too, and we are all learning together. Be aware that they will speak to you in industry terms that you might not understand. You will speak to them in terms they probably won’t understand either. What an opportunity to be on an even playing field!

To help you prepare for that call, we’ve assembled some ideas for early actions and things to consider in the sidebar on page 9.

After your initial call with a brand, and once you understand what the general scope of the project is, it’s time to get your fibershed together to discuss. This is also the time to decide as a group if this is something you can take on and if you feel like you are in alignment with the designer or brand.

Once you are able to find the why in “Why should we do this?” you are ready to respond to the brand.

## **Here are 5 things to ask THE BRAND:**

- 1. What kind of product do you want to make?*
- 2. What kind of fiber do you want?*
- 3. How much fiber do you think you would need?*
- 4. What kinds of stories are you hoping to tell about this project?*
- 5. What kind of timeline are you envisioning?*

## **Here are 5 things to ask YOUR TEAM:**

- 1. Is this project in alignment with our mission?*
- 2. Is the brand looking at the partnership just for marketing?*
- 3. Is the brand looking to invest in our supply chain in some way?*
- 4. Does the brand consider environmental as well as ethical issues?*
- 5. What will success from this project look like to us?*

The next step should be a Non-Disclosure Agreement (NDA). (**See Appendix for an NDA template.**) This NDA is a legally binding contract that establishes a confidential relationship. The party or parties signing the agreement agree that sensitive information they may obtain will not be made available to any others. This helps to ensure that the brand can't do things like bypass you and steal your information or supply chain, and that you won't tell the world prematurely about what you are creating with them.

We have seen large brands convince fibersheds to do a number of things for them to prove a concept: from creating free garment samples, to investing in R&D time they never get reimbursed for, to trying to coax cotton farmers to give up heritage seeds. And the many fibershed consultants who worked on good faith to connect brands to a supply chain? They never got reimbursed, and the brands now had full access to the entire fibershed supply chain to use as they want.

Remember that as a fibershed, you can pick and choose who you want to be affiliated with. This NDA might be a tell-all as to how things will or will not go. Be smart.

## Developing the Project



**From Climate Beneficial™ beanies and cloth to U.S. hemp t-shirts and carbon-farmed yarn, the Fibershed community has been busy.**

Laura Sansone of the New York Textile Lab says, “I’m currently working with smaller brands and building smaller economies. Small designers don’t have the ability to put money into something to meet minimums and that’s a HUGE barrier. But I believe in efficiencies of interdependence instead of efficiencies of scale. We need more of a truly distributed model, and we need more participants (brands) to help build it.”

The North Face’s **Backyard Project** in 2014 was one of the first times we heard about a large brand crafting responsible products from sustainable materials and excitingly, almost completely within the Northern California Fibershed. Other large brands have since come to realize that responsibly taking care of people and the planet is what they want their brand to be recognized for as well.

Consider NYC-based Mara Hoffman’s 2020 Climate Beneficial™ wool sweater and beanie collection, EILEEN FISHER’s purchasing of third generation cotton farmer Dosi Alvarez’s transitional organic cotton in New Mexico, or Jeanne Carver’s Shaniko Wool Company in Maupin, Oregon, which outfitted the 2018 and 2022 U.S. Winter Olympic teams in collaboration with Ralph Lauren, including sweaters, caps, and mittens worn by the Team USA athletes, coaches, and staff in South Korea and in Beijing.

Smaller but no less impressive examples of fibersheds working with independent brands include Laura Sansone of the New York Textile Lab Fibershed supplying carbon-farmed alpaca and wool yarns to Wol Hide, Vincent James Designs, Christina Whitney Wong (and more), and the Southeastern New England Fibershed’s work with Gamine to create a vintage-inspired workwear vest created from Rhode Island wool. Behind such creative projects, however, there are some pragmatic questions and details to consider.

## Questions to consider before agreeing to a project:

- *What is the proposed fiber?*
- *Is it logical to grow it if you don't have a regional company to process it?*
- *Can the brand support the processing of the fiber by investing in some infrastructure and training?*
- *What does the realistic timeline look like? (Remember, slow fashion is slow.)*
- *What are the rough costs, and who is going to pay for them up front?*
- *What does YOUR time cost?*
- *Have you assessed what the deliverables, financials, and R&D involved will be?*
- *Does your contract cover all of the above?*

**See Appendix for an example of a Project Intake Form to give to brands to better understand what they are looking for. Their response will help you answer these questions.**

## Getting Your Ducks in a Row

**Before you head into that first conversation with a brand**, try to have all your ducks in a row. This section presents a number of resources to help fibersheds make sure you have the kinds of connections, support, and information you'll need to create a successful partnership. Resources are arranged roughly in order of the supply chain, starting with the farmers and other supply chain partners, and also including legal, financial, and other support resources.

**The first step** for any fibershed when going into a conversation with a brand is to have a clear understanding of, and to have built relationships with, the fiber farmers and ranchers who are the base of the supply chain in your region.

**Website:** Fibershed's Affiliate Program website template offers you a quick way to create your own regional-specific site. Your mission statement will help determine what your supply chain directory looks like. Are you more focused on a specific fiber? Are you more focused on education?

**Inventory Survey:** If you don't know which farms are in your region, and which fibers are growing where, one great way to find out is to put together your own inventory survey. Once you begin to do that outreach, people will start sharing and circulating your survey and information, which will help build your network.

**Supply Chain/Producer Directory:** Ideally, you can promote both these growers and your fibershed, and immediately establish your credibility, by building out a producer directory on your website.

To start developing your supply chain directory and map, nothing replaces old-fashioned legwork and relationship-building with regional farmers and ranchers. Many commercial growers don't maintain websites. Keep in mind that many farmers and ranchers may have had negative past experiences with large brands and are usually running on extremely tight profit margins. Building trust is critical before you even think of reaching out to growers about potential brand projects.

It's also critical to keep in mind what Shannon Welsh of the Pacific Northwest Fibershed told us about why farmers are cautious to grow fiber flax in their region: "In the 2000s in Oregon, there was a group that came in and organized around 200 acres of fiber flax seed production in the Willamette Valley. The company organizing the flax production ultimately fell into bankruptcy and many farmers were not paid. Now, farmers are skeptical because all the brands are trying to get to them—[farmers believe that] brands just want it for their marketing."

**Fibers:** Ask yourself which fibers grow best in your region: cotton, flax, hemp, wool, alpaca, leather? Build your own cohort based on these fiber farmers and processing in your region.

Dana Davis at Mara Hoffman has some additional practical advice for Fibershed Affiliates:

*“What I would recommend is there being some type of profile for each of the fibersheds—so that there is information around the factories, working conditions, and what certifications they have. Something like that would be really helpful to receive.”*

**RECOMMENDATION:** Put together a two-pager with your fibershed’s history, mission, pictures of region, regional supply chain—this helps you clarify your mission and put your best foot forward.

## Legal Resources & Templates:

**In our interviews** with fibersheds and brands, we often heard about the importance of understanding contracts, reading the fine print, and getting good legal help when you need it.

**A few examples:** One fibershed was asked to turn over their traditional seeds to a multinational corporation, and another fibershed was undercut by a brand that bypassed them and went straight to growers in their region.

According to Shannon Welsh, the three most important types of contracts to develop and have reviewed by a lawyer are:

- Contracts for land lease
- Contract when someone has agreed to buy fibers  
– **See Appendix for sample**
- Your own NDA – **See Appendix for sample**

The best way to find a good lawyer with knowledge of agricultural and business regulations in your region is to ask other local farmers or farming organizations.

## Audit & Supply Chain Tools:

**Fibersheds should also be aware** that many large brands are used to working with “auditing” tools to check on the labor and environmental standards of their factory and mill suppliers. Like a financial audit, these systems usually consist of a set of checkboxes for long lists of “best practices” that are included in various sustainability standards.

Dana Davis of Mara Hoffman notes that most audits are designed for larger facilities and probably won’t be appropriate for smaller producers. However, she recommends a couple of audit systems designed for smaller or artisan facilities, including:

- **The NEST auditing tool, built for workshops:**  
[www.buildanest.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/01/Nest-Standards-for-Ethical-Compliance-in-Homes-and-Small-Workshops.pdf](http://www.buildanest.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/01/Nest-Standards-for-Ethical-Compliance-in-Homes-and-Small-Workshops.pdf)
- **The Fair Wear Foundation audit:**  
[api.fairwear.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/06/FWFauditmanual-march2012.pdf](http://api.fairwear.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/06/FWFauditmanual-march2012.pdf)  
[www.ispo.com/en/markets/id\\_79695846/fair-wear-foundation-code-of-labour-practices.html](http://www.ispo.com/en/markets/id_79695846/fair-wear-foundation-code-of-labour-practices.html)

## The Fair Wear code regulates a total of eight points:

1. *The limitation of working hours*
2. *The free choice of workplace*
3. *There must be no exploitative child labour*
4. *No discrimination in employment*
5. *A legally binding employment contract must be concluded*
6. *Working conditions must be safe and healthy*
7. *Freedom of association and the right to collective bargaining must not be restricted*
8. *A living wage must be paid*

While this list may feel a bit overwhelming for fibersheds at an earlier stage in their brand conversations, it's important to have an understanding of the items included in these audits. Knowing the requirements that brands have to meet will help you show how your fibershed can help brands achieve these requirements for fully traceable, transparent, and fair supply chains.

Fibersheds should keep in mind that many brand representatives have never visited farms and might not have a sense of what constitutes “best practices.” Fibershed Affiliates can anticipate and help meet these needs by understanding the kinds of information brands are looking for when conducting audits, and working with local farm and mill suppliers to have their own information about best practices for animal welfare, worker well-being, and environmental standards ready up front.

**Remember:** When you're working with a regional supply chain, you **KNOW** everybody, and you have access to them to ask about traceability. So remember that you are bringing value into the brand by providing the kind of transparency that they normally have to rely on audits to provide.



Illustrations by Anna Brones



## Grants & Funding Sources

**As mentioned above**, one important role that Fibershed Affiliates can often play is to search for and secure grant funding to support pilot projects in your region. Information and resources on grant seeking could, and do, easily fill many books, toolkits, and websites.

**Here are a few basic starting places:**

- The United States Department of Agriculture offers many grant programs to support producers:  
[www.usda.gov/topics/farming/grants-and-loans](http://www.usda.gov/topics/farming/grants-and-loans)  
Including their Value Added Producer Grants:  
[www.rd.usda.gov/programs-services/business-programs/value-added-producer-grants](http://www.rd.usda.gov/programs-services/business-programs/value-added-producer-grants)
- For each state, there are state department of ag grants. Starting at the National Association of State Departments of Agriculture (NASDA) site can help you navigate to your state's department of agriculture:  
[www.nasda.org/states/state-directory](http://www.nasda.org/states/state-directory)
- To find foundations and other private funders, this blog post offers a great list of starting points and information on how to work around the subscription fees of many foundation search sites.  
[www.peakproposals.com/blog/the-best-free-places-to-search-for-grant-funding](http://www.peakproposals.com/blog/the-best-free-places-to-search-for-grant-funding)
- **Fibershed Micro-Grants:** Fibershed offers annual micro-grants to Fibershed Affiliate members. Grant application periods usually open in early summer.

## Who are you in alignment with?

While it's not necessarily critical for a conversation with a brand, understanding who else you are in alignment with in your region can help your fibershed's work in many ways.

A few ideas of potential partnerships include:

- Regional agriculture organizations / “Buy Local” Programs
- Environmental groups
- Cultural groups or arts groups in your state
- Local economic development groups
- Microplastics and plastic-reduction groups



## Consultants & Experts

Not many people out there have the experience and knowledge to fully understand both the fibershed's and the brand's perspective on a potential partnership.

A few key people who do and can offer consulting support include:

- **Krystle Moody Wood, Materevolve** | Experiential learning, technical textile consulting, and educational speaking and tours
- **Laura Sansone, New York Textile Lab** | U.S. Climate Beneficial™ wool consulting
- **Shannon Welsh & Angela Wartes-Kahl, Pacific Northwest Fibershed and Fibrevolution** | U.S. flax consulting
- **Stephanie Wilkes, stephanywilkes.com** | Wool supply chain consulting
- **Jessica Marati, Reconsidered** | Design strategies, crafting communications and building communities
- **Kathy Hattori, Botanical Colors** | Natural dye consulting
- **Amy DuFault, Amy DuFault Consulting** | Sustainable strategies for U.S. fibers and natural dyes, storytelling, Co-Founder of Southeastern New England Fibershed
- **Sarah Kelley, Common Threads Consulting** | Research and strategy development for funders, investors, and brands

# Case Studies

How did other fibersheds make products with brands? From tips on contractual agreements to sourcing and supply chains, as well as ways to position yourself for investment capital needed for the future of your U.S. fiber chain, our experts weighed in.



**Gamine** is a Tiverton, RI-based apparel company, founded by gardener and nurserywoman Taylor Johnston. Taylor started Gamine with the goal of supporting and celebrating the processes and traditions of American-made work clothing. From the first pair of selvedge dungarees Taylor made, Gamine has amassed a global following and become known for archival-inspired designs and transparent production processes.

As part of her design process, Taylor often creates garments that she wishes she had for all her gardening and nursery work. Taking inspiration from Rhode Island-based Brown's Beach Cloth, she contacted the Southeastern New England Fibershed to see if they could collaborate to create a regional supply chain to make a regionally-sourced vest.

"I've had this long-standing interest in making things that are no longer made here [domestically] with workwear clothing, and the idea of a vest was floating around in my head for a while," says Taylor, who is also an active member of the Southeastern New England Fibershed.

## CASE STUDY:

### The Southeastern New England Fibershed + Gamine's Wool Work Vest

*In this case, the Southeastern New England Fibershed served mostly as a connector. The supply chain needs for the brand included: wool, processing, spinning, weaving, cut and sew.*

*Production weaver and textile historian Peggy Hart, who collaborated to put the supply chain together as well as wove the fabric to make the vest, says, "I think what's really cool about this project is that this original product, the Brown's Beach Vest, was a Rhode Island-made item that was sold around the country to people, but it was fairly local in how it operated. They took advantage of the reprocessed wool floating around Massachusetts and Rhode Island and incorporated it into the garment to cut costs. I like the full circle piece of this and Taylor trying to do this in Rhode Island to begin with."*

Peggy Hart, weaver of the fabric for the workwear vest, analyzing a vest prototype (Photos by Taylor Johnston, Founder Gamine)



“One thing I’ve learned is when you go to get yarn spun, some mills are better than others at spinning specific types of yarn. Don’t ask a mill to do something they’re not familiar with. Most of these people have learned from trial and error and experience. Most of the people that set up mini mills are not spinners. It’s a pretty steep learning curve to create a yarn that’s usable,” says Peggy.

“I’ve had a number of unfortunate experiences with wool being spun,” adds Peggy, who advises that if possible, have the mills describe what they are best at and also the weights of the yarns they are spinning. Most mills are able to make a two-ply worsted weight, but someone who needs fine wool won’t even go there. “The weaver can’t do anything with the yarn unless it’s spun well,” adds Peggy.

When the group first started out, they knew there was regional wool that could potentially make a small run of vests, but where? And also, because there isn’t any small-scale scouring and spinning in the area, where to do that? “Having been buying wool and having wool processed for the past 30 years, I know who to go to in the area, which is great for these local fibersheds. It’s helpful that I know who to work with and know so many sheep farmers because I go to a lot of wool shows,” says Peggy, whose valuable knowledge of the New England landscape helped Taylor locate 60 pounds of Dorset wool from the University of Rhode Island (URI).

**TIP: Find experts in your fibershed to help guide you and the brand. Also, make sure you pay them for their time!**

With the URI wool purchased by Taylor, Peggy took it to be processed and spun at Green Mountain Spinnery in Putney, Vermont.



Dorset sheep at the University of Rhode Island (Photo by Taylor Johnston, Founder Gamine)



much and work backwards from there. So saying it's all going to be custom work and as close to the original—I would advise not starting there because it's expensive and people really needing a work vest won't be able to afford it."

But Taylor, who knows her customer well, comes at the price point from a different angle. "Yes it has to be functional, and I want to make sure it's a piece I can personally wear and have it be functional and practical, but I think cost is a really interesting consideration for Gamine because our customers have resources and would want to support someone like Peggy and be good to the environment."

"Ultimately I don't think our customers are hoping to have buttons and snaps hand hammered in my friend's barn, but as local as we can and nothing is perfect," says Taylor. "I'm a gardener, and it takes at least 10 years to see progress."

Taylor says she and Peggy have worked together truly symbiotically to have a synergy of ideas and skills that feels incredibly special.

After the cloth was woven by Peggy, it went on to a production sewer who followed Taylor's pattern and made it into a vest.

### **And then there's the cost.**

Peggy says, "What's interesting about the Brown's Beach Vest is that it has three different yarns, and I'm always trying to figure out how to make things as affordable as possible. So I ran it by Taylor—could we make the weft all local and then just source the warp yarns . . . so half local? I always tell people to start with your market and how many and how



**CASE STUDY:**

# The Acadiana Fibershed — How to Keep Your Fibershed Foundation Story Intact

**The Acadiana Fibershed** is dedicated to preserving the Acadian Brown Cotton heirloom seed and donates a portion of all cotton seed grown to the University of Louisiana, Lafayette, Cade Farm Seed Bank. They work with farmers who are committed to responsible growing, pursuing organic certification, and adhering to the requirements of the State Department of Agriculture and Forestry, Boll Weevil Eradication Commission.

The Acadiana Fibershed is also preserving the past and creating the future of Southwest Louisiana through efforts to develop a supply chain that will support a sustainable fashion industry within the French speaking parishes of Southwest Louisiana.

Currently their fibershed encompasses 22 parishes in Southwest Louisiana. The area's name recognizes the region's historic role as the area in which approximately 3,000 Acadian refugees sought sanctuary after being exiled from present-day Nova Scotia in the early 18th century.



*Heirloom Acadian Brown Cotton grown in Louisiana — from the fields, to hand processing, to final products (Photos Courtesy of Acadiana Fibershed – Acadian Brown Cotton)*



The time-honored traditions of family, self-sufficiency, and economic reciprocity remain intact to this day, along with the cultivation of Acadian Brown Cotton. The natural brown cotton was used by the early settlers to weave dowry textiles for Cajun brides referred to as L'amour de Maman—a mother's labor of love.

With all that work, why on earth would they ever give their cotton seed to an organization known for genetically modifying seeds?

Co-Founder of the Acadiana Fibershed Sharon Donnan says when Company X, a large processing company, started courting her and the team over processing their cotton, they were so excited—but then they had to take a big step back.

“What we encountered was a company only working with genetically modified seed, and when my farmers heard this and realized there was a big connection to the largest chemical producer in the world, it was adios.”

Even though Company X would only be spinning their cotton, the company was very clear that they also wanted to plant that same brown cotton around the facility and neighboring farms to tell a deeper,

regional story. Unfortunately, the story wasn't theirs to tell, and the Acadiana Fibershed realized it was just part of a marketing ploy.

“One of our farmers deeply involved in regenerative agriculture filled me in on the company and warned we should always dig below the surface,” says Sharon, adding that Acadiana Fibershed team member and farmer Bruno Sagrera said, “don't work anywhere close to that road they're on.” With their heritage seed so close to the genetically modified seed of Company X, there could be genetic contamination of their cotton strain.

*“I think if we were to work with a brand, there would have to be a partnership where our story stays ours, and Acadiana is not exploited, because that's what's happened over and over. If there's a brand that could do something like that for us and not ask us to lose our identity and give it up or sell it, we would be a lot more interested.” – Sharon Donnan*



Photos Courtesy of Acadiana Fibershed – Acadian Brown Cotton

For now, the team is getting trained on how to run a mini mill and is trying to get funding from the state.

“We know what we’re doing, we have a budget, now we need funding to be in control and do our own processing and spinning,” says Sharon. Though the team is walking that fine artisan line where handmade and mechanized meet, the desire to transform local industry is strong.

“This experiment for me has been about breaking molds right and left. I’m not going to say there isn’t a possibility out there where we really increase our yield of cotton, I just know that right now it’s all about baby steps, no need to go faster,” says Sharon.



CASE STUDY:

## New York Textile Lab Fibershed —Decentralizing Supply Chains to Grow Regional Economies



**New York (NY) Textile Lab** is a design and consulting company that designs yarns and textiles that connect designers to fiber producers and mills to help grow an economically diverse textile supply ecosystem. It's also the fibershed currently serving New York City. The resources they provide give designers agency to make better decisions about their social and environmental investments. Their textiles embody deep value through unique sourcing and production practices. The fibers offered through the NY Textile Lab, and which are also included in *The New York Regional Yarn Sourcebook*, are grown on healthy, climate beneficial soil. Founder Laura Sansone partners with mills and manufacturers that are local, transparent, and ethical.

NY Textile Lab believes that the world's textile production should grow out of abundant, regenerative systems that emerge from collective thinking, rather than centralized systems that rely on extraction, scarcity, and competition. "My main objective is to build a decentralized supply network and I would love to see more mill facilities and more participants to build that kind of economy,"



says Laura. "Why not start in a way that creates more economic diversity? Capitalism tends to centralize so I like to offer an opportunity to grow in a different way."

Laura is fluent in talking about the shift away from fibers reliant on petrochemicals and big agricultural systems. She envisions biodegradable materials like wool and other natural fibers cultivated on smaller farms to bring benefits including better farming practices that have regenerative outcomes, reduced consumption of resources, and a focus on local jobs. These strategies bring both environmental and economic diversity and better stewardship to the planet.



“Ultimately what I envision is a world where designers make their own yarn, and they have a person-to-person connection with the farms and the mills for a truly distributed network. I see it as a person-to-person

connection enabling trust in the supply chain akin to Blockchain,” says Laura, who is currently working on an app to facilitate these connections as a next step for her New York Regional Yarn Sourcebook. Laura says we need to make visible these better behaviors and use tech as a way to illuminate reputational currency. “It’s hard to keep trust in the equation without having a tool to foster that.”

Another area where Laura sees a way to create deeper value is to be thinking and educating beyond the price. Some of the pathways she sees to highlight the climate beneficial and regenerative pieces and ethics questions lead through circular design and deeper reflections on nature: “We have to start looking at nature and our agrarian systems as a guide and as inspiration for designers and makers. Why are we following market systems and not natural systems?”

*As designers become more aware of the significance of their designs, they have to lock into which story resonates most with them and tell it. Is it water or energy efficiency? Carbon footprint? Human rights? They need to be able to then discuss with their buyers why something is the price it is and get the story supported. “Buyers have to be made aware of capacities and limitations as well as impact,” says Laura.*

**“We’re designers and we problem solve. That’s just what we do.”**

Through the NY Textile Lab’s Carbon Farm Network, a group of fiber producers who use climate beneficial practices on their farms and climate-conscious textile and clothing designers who develop yarns and textile products from carbon farmed fibers are co-existing.

The Carbon Farm Plans that are developed for Laura’s partnering farms are reviewed and administered by the Carbon Farm Network’s Agricultural Planner. The fiber is verified Climate Beneficial™ through the Fibershed Affiliate Program. NY Textile Lab is excited to be connecting designers to Climate Beneficial™ materials that have the potential to sequester carbon for the benefit of our climate.



## CARBON FARM PLANNING & IMPLEMENTATION





*“It’s hard to find people to work with, but I believe in efficiencies of interdependence instead of efficiencies of scale. We need to work towards a truly distributed model, and we need more participants to build it,” says Laura. “What we are talking about is a very synthesized process—a circular process—and a shift in our relationship to our clothing.”*



Photo credits (clockwise from above):  
Vincent James x NY Textile Lab,  
Teagan West (2)

# You have to meet in the middle!

**In our interviews** with both brands and fibersheds, the tiered supply chain model emerged as a key tool for understanding how to create more productive dialogue. For fibersheds, understanding this longstanding model for the apparel and home goods supply chain is key, as it shapes many elements of brands' expectations for partnership conversations. For brands, understanding how fibersheds and the fiber producers they work with can fit into or serve as an intentional alternative to the tiered model can be key to communicating the opportunities for fibershed partnerships to other decision makers in the company.

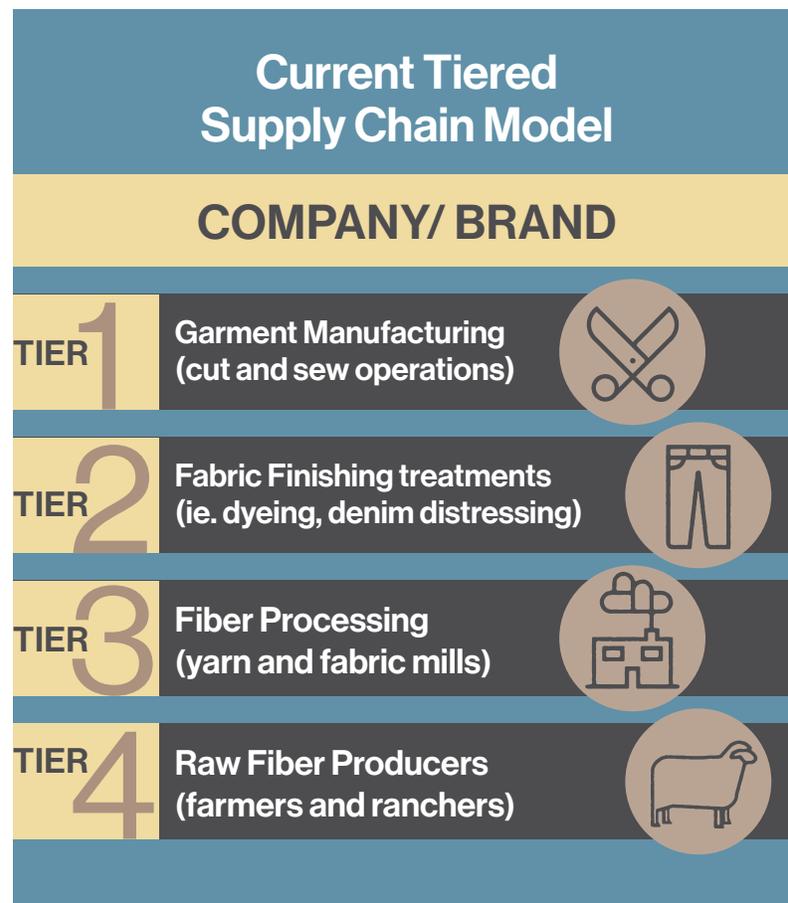
If you're new to this system, it helps to understand just a bit about how it evolved and operates today.

In her 2019 book *Fashionopolis*, journalist Dana Thomas traces the structure of today's apparel brands to a few key historical developments. Around the time of the Civil War, demand for "ready-to-wear" clothing began to increase—first driven by the need to create army uniforms in standard sizes and then by returning troops who sought out menswear made in the same manner. The trend of further dispersing supply chains to seek the cheapest labor began quickly. By the end of the 1950s, apparel jobs were moving out of Manhattan to areas including the Bronx and Brooklyn, upstate New York, and nearby areas in Pennsylvania. Companies were soon trucking fabric and finished clothing back and forth long distances. Thomas writes, "The scheme was ridiculously complicated—all in an effort to pinch pennies. Nevertheless, it stuck, and was the naissance of today's utterly fragmented global supply chain."

As the "fast fashion" system took hold in the 1990s, this system soon expanded to the global supply chain. As these brands chased the lowest labor costs, supply chains atomized even further, until "nearly every step was—and is—contracted or

subcontracted; few fashion companies own their factories."

The subcontracting system described in *Fashionopolis* is now in place across virtually all apparel brands, even those most focused on sustainability and ethics. The industry refers to raw material producers, including farmers, as "Tier 4," yarn and fabric mills as "Tier 3," other fabric finishing treatments (dyeing, denim distressing) as "Tier 2," and garment manufacturing, or "cut and sew," as "Tier 1." Within each tier, contracted factories may, in turn, outsource to a host of other subcontractors, many of which operate under the legal radar and are essentially invisible both to the brands and to the customer.



By understanding the tiered system, a Fibershed Affiliate can better understand how to speak a brand’s language about how the fibershed project will fit into, or be an alternative to, the brand’s current supply chain. Oftentimes, this project will be more of a test run or capsule collection that will be smaller and easier to measure for things like materials, energy, and success.

When asked what a fibershed could do to help a conversation with a brand go more smoothly, one brand representative, who asked to remain anonymous, suggested looking for a way to say which role each player has in the tiered model: “I think having a little bit of delineation and sort of labeling some of those steps in the supply chain would [be] beneficial.”

Most importantly, this brand representative noted, “Honestly, my visibility rarely goes beyond Tier 2. I’ve never set foot in a Tier 3 [factory] . . . I’ve never been to a farm or anything for Tier 4. Most brands are probably operating like that, where they really only have transparency to the Tier 2— **so having any [transparency] below that is super-duper valuable.**”

For brands that desire it, Fibersheds can offer transparency all the way down to the Tier 4 level, thanks to their deep knowledge of local fiber farmers and supply chain partners. We couldn’t say it better—that makes all of this effort to create a regional supply chain super-duper valuable!

## Fibershed’s Model for Climate Beneficial™ Fiber and Clothing

Wearing clothing and eating food grown on landscapes where increased soil carbon sequestration takes place due to the implementation of specific carbon farming practices supports the management of the land. In this way, people in the surrounding community participate in carbon farming when they purchase food and material goods that are produced on these landscapes.



# So you are a brand?



increasing dramatically. And while this interest is exciting, the same fibersheds tell us that many of the brands they talked with were not willing to move slower, with more intention, or to pay a premium to have access to a U.S.-based supply chain. Others have said that although there are opportunities to invest in technology to process these fibers and build a dependable supply chain, brands walk away until things are a little more “together.”

## Supply chains have changed dramatically—have you?

**The pandemic made it loud and clear** to brands that the supply chain is unpredictable. Many fibersheds have reported that brands from all over have reached out to access fibers like cotton, wool, hemp, and flax. The desire to access natural dyes from U.S. farmers is also



*Photo credits (clockwise from above): Andrew Bureson, 10,000 Pounds of Cotton Farmer; Vincent James x NY Textile Lab; Mara Hoffman*

# Do you have the team?

## Is there a new way you could look at your supply chain and invest in it? What does investing in it mean to you and your company through an environmental or social lens?

That same anonymous brand representative says: “I am working on a project right now in Asia around natural dye. Natural dye is a very big conversation that we’ve been having over the past six months, and to do it at a commercial scale has been a nightmare. And every time I ask one of the dyehouses that we’re working with, ‘Where did the plant stuff come from?’ they don’t know. Or they won’t tell me.”

As more parts of the supply chain get called upon by a younger generation steeped in environmental traceability and human rights, being oblivious is no longer an option.

As Krystle Moody Wood of Materevolve tells us, “Reshoring gives you that opportunity to get involved, meet your partners, see what’s happening, see the process itself. It just gives you that access to understanding how the parts and pieces go together and creating a much more thoughtful and connected product. From the brand lens, reshoring gives you that opportunity for education, that opportunity to fully understand and connect the dots.”

And as the anonymous brand representative says, **“Anybody who’s not willing to change and adopt better practices is going to be put out of business.”**

## So why are you doing this?

**In the conversations** we had with our case study participants as well as with brands as part of our own personal work, the “why” of working regionally all seems to start in the right place and with one passionate person who is part of the sustainability team. Great idea, but you’re going to need a lot more buy in. Putting emotions aside as to why you should, simply because it’s “good,” what are ways you can bring the idea to your team and make a point that it’s necessary? How can you show other teams that are part of your brand how it’s more than just marketing and trendy?

Do you have a sustainability team? A made-in-the-USA team? It’s time to get focused.

**What environmental or social issue is most in alignment with your brand?**

**What rings most true for your team?**

**Where has there been consistent interest in issues regarding people and the planet?**

You’re going to need more than just one person to move anything forward. Sometimes it’s through trend forecasting that you might see the future of the fashion and textile industry as a whole. Maybe environmental issues like water and energy simply must be addressed. Maybe a focus on human rights in your supply chain bubbles to the top.

For every pause in your team to look at sustainability and human rights, there is an opportunity to be in alliance with a fibershed.

When we first met our anonymous brand representative, they were a fully engaged, sustainably-minded materials designer working in innovation. During the pandemic, the passionate, regional supply chain-builder went back to school, got an MBA, and is now a Product Sustainability Manager.

They told us, “I want to be able to shake hands with every person in the supply chain. That is my end goal, that is my passion project, that is what I may work on the rest of my life as an individual, whether or not it is with [this brand].”

While it takes more than one person (and passion) to move initiatives forward, having a focused and educated leader in sustainability and supply chains is crucial. At least a decade ago, these people were not taken seriously by brands—now they are in high demand worldwide.

Ask yourself if you really know who is leading your team on these issues and if they are the right fit.

# Who knows how to start?

**Since the concept of people and planet** really arrived on the fashion and textile scene in the early 2000s (not that long after NAFTA and the World Free Trade Agreement were signed), there's been a learning curve in fashion. Who ever thought there'd be a sustainable materials team focusing on innovation in textiles? Who ever thought there'd be sustainable certifications for water, energy, chemicals and organic? Who ever thought life cycle assessments and soil-to-soil design were going to be a thing? Who went to school for that back in the day? Very few, as profit superseded people and planet by a massive longshot.

"I go into all of my conversations with new clients and I say, 'We're going to save talking about price until the end. And when we do, it's just going to be that this is where costs are at today. And when I come back to you, we're going to re-talk about how that costing model needs to change,'" says

Materevolve's Krystle Moody Wood about shifting minds around value and cost.

And besides cost and building this purpose-driven supply chain, how do you even talk about it to all the other teams involved?

"We had a ton of support from Fibershed themselves, with the language about how to speak to the product. That was extremely helpful. We're a small team, and when it comes to marketing, when it comes to copy, we always want someone to bounce ideas off of. We got that support from Fibershed, and that was huge for us," says Dana Davis, Vice President of Sustainability, Product and Business Strategy at Mara Hoffman.

While not every regional Fibershed Affiliate has all the language and information you will need, there are sustainability sherpas working with and on behalf of Fibershed that do. Working in collaboration with your sustainability, innovations, or U.S.-made team, a fibershed can keep you on track and knowledgeable on what can and cannot be done here in the U.S. or even abroad in one of our international fibersheds. And regarding what can't be done, well, what an exciting opportunity for you to invest and build.

You can find a fibershed in your region through Fibershed's Affiliate Directory:

[fibershed.org/affiliate-directory](https://fibershed.org/affiliate-directory)

*Photo by Paige Green*

# How can you get access to the fiber?

**Cotton, wool, alpaca, hemp, and flax** are all available fibers here in the U.S. and abroad. Actually, throw in natural dye raw materials as well. Depending on the fibershed, the inventory for all of these is all over the board. A few things that are consistent, however, are that the inventory is growing and the research on machines to process fiber are at our fingertips.

It's time to invest in U.S. infrastructure so that Fibershed Affiliates worldwide can accommodate exciting projects from brands like yours.

“We often wonder why brands won't support building infrastructure. That one machine would be a game-changer in the U.S., and it's not even that much money,” says Shannon Welsh, Co-Founder of the Pacific Northwest Fibershed and Co-Founder of Fibrevolution, who will launch the first fiber flax mill in over 50 years in Oregon. The mill will serve as a blueprint for additional locations on the East coast and Midwest.

*Photo credits (clockwise from upper right): Paige Green, TS Designs, John Morgan of StereoEye Productions*



We've talked with many fibersheds who have had brands approach them asking to partner, and the fibershed can accommodate the amount of fiber they need. What's the problem then? Processing. Like Shannon said earlier, investing in processing would be absolutely game-changing for farmers and, in return, for you.

“Bioregional is the umbrella for all of the things most important to me. You're fostering well-being for the environment as well as local sourcing and not shipping all over the country for a larger carbon footprint. We need to make visible these better behaviors, and use tech as a way to create a more reputational currency,” says Laura Sansone, founder of the NY Textile Lab, a fibershed serving New York City (and beyond). Laura is currently working with farmers on a Climate Beneficial™ Certification, as well as creating a Holochain App to help track and grow a decentralized, bioregional textile economy.

**So ask yourself: Are you going to wait for everything to get sorted out? Or are you going to lead the conversation or collective that makes access to these fibers a reality?**

# What does success look like to you?

**For so long**, success has always meant financial gains. We understand it's hard to think otherwise, but if we want to change the damaging trajectory of the textile industry, success has to include the planet.

“The product is a very physical way to say it succeeded, but I would love to see a commitment to work with ‘transitional’ cotton,” says the anonymous brand representative—meaning, in this case, cotton that is being shifted from conventional farming practices to regenerative or organic production. “That’s a marker for success as well. We mutually helped one another—that is success too,” they add.

What would it look like if your success was in helping farmers sequester carbon, helping processors recycle precious water, or working to conserve energy utilizing alternative energy? What if you built a new tier system for your brand that started with the farmer being paid what they needed first and built the cost in from there?

**President of TS Designs Eric Henry sums it up:** “You gotta do what you gotta do to keep the lights on, but to do better for people and planet, you’re going to have to have patience and a long-term perspective. I rarely see this with brands because they insist on working with the fashion calendar. They don’t look at it from the farmer’s perspective or the processing perspective. Brands have to make a commitment for the long-term and start building.”

There will always be pushback on these conversations, so be prepared when going to your team with valid points as to why success has got to mean something more than money. Like Eric says, you have to do what you have to do, but don’t give up easily. Come to the table with some exciting ideas.

And though this might sound radical, you can totally create your own sustainability initiatives that are outside of what everyone else is doing. Make success more bespoke, and stop competing with other brands who have been practicing sustainability for a long time. Even brands in sustainability sometimes can’t see the forest for the trees.

## Five key points when approaching a fibershed

1. **Get on a discovery call and better understand what your regional fibershed has to offer your project in terms of fiber.**
2. **Understand they may not know the language you speak as a brand. Break it down or hire a fibershed mediator to help you translate.**
3. **DON’T ask the fibershed for a whole bunch of certifications and audits. This is a relationship you are building together, so create something together.**
4. **Remember that you as a brand have the ability to come up with special marketing, campaigns, or certifications to support this new localized project. Levi’s WaterLESS campaign or The North Face Backyard Hoodie are great examples of this approach.**
5. **Plan a field trip with your team to meet the farmers and the processors and start building relationships.**

# Case Studies

How do brands work with a fibershed? From tips on how to create a meaningful and fully traceable U.S. supply chain, to creating a whole new textile language, our experts weighed in.

## CASE STUDY:

### Mara Hoffman + Fibershed Climate Beneficial™ Wool

*The recent sweater project by pioneering sustainability brand Mara Hoffman in partnership with Fibershed offers lots of great take-homes for brands.*



**Dana Davis, Vice President of Sustainability,** Product and Business Strategy for Mara Hoffman, shares critical lessons from this process.

For Mara Hoffman, the real root of this project was being crystal clear on the area of sustainability that is most important to them. As Dana puts it: **“Transparency, always.”**

When the COVID-19 pandemic made the importance of transparent supply chains all the

more clear, Dana saw an opportunity. “At the beginning of the pandemic,” Dana recalled, “I started really diving more into ‘How do we grow our U.S. supply chain—outside of just what we do as far as cut & sew?’ And I’d always wanted to do something with Climate Beneficial™ yarn.” Dana reached out to Stacie Chavez, owner of Imperial Yarns and the manager of the recently-launched Fibershed Climate Beneficial™ Fiber Pool (learn more at [climatebeneficialfiberpool.com](https://climatebeneficialfiberpool.com)).

Stacie Chavez had recently strengthened her partnership with Fibershed, and Dana was able to work with her to connect with mills that were already familiar with spinning the Climate Beneficial™ wool. This project also involved a close partnership with the central Fibershed organization and its northern California geographic focus.



*Overall, Dana feels, “What Fibershed brings is this community idea and all this connectedness—if we don’t have the connection, we could pick up the phone and find that. It feels very community-driven, which is very aligned with how we approach manufacturing.”*

Reflecting on the benefits of working with Fibershed, Dana listed a few key benefits.

First, she recalls, “We had a ton of support from Fibershed themselves, with the language about how to speak to the product. That was extremely helpful. We’re a small team, and when it comes to marketing, when it comes to copy, we always want someone to bounce ideas off of. We got that support from Fibershed, and that was huge for us.”

Another benefit Dana found was the ability “to have stories.” As she learned, “Stacie [Chavez] is really close with the owner of the farm. If this wasn’t COVID-19, we would have been [to the farm] in a hot second. But even though that wasn’t possible, we were still able to get that personal connection, because these were people who’d known each other for a really long time, and that’s always really important to us.”

*Mara Hoffman’s Juliana Sweater in production, including the sheep from which the wool originated (Photos by Mara Hoffman)*



In practical terms, Mara Hoffman benefited from the localized supply chain in ways that led to cost savings. Dana notes that “Even though it’s a complex supply chain and the lead times are long, we’re able to move quickly, which is always great when having that localized supply chain. We didn’t have to overproduce, which we never want to do. We were able to order the exact amount of yarn we needed. Everybody was nimble throughout the process.”

For other brands interested in piloting a local project, Dana has some key words of advice: **“Leaning into your suppliers’ knowledge is key here.”**

In terms of pricing in particular, Dana notes, “That’s when the supplier has to educate the brands on what these costs are. And then they’re being transparent about what those costs are, why, what it looks like . . . I think you have to trust the supply chain for that. And if you’re not getting to the price you need, dissecting that and understanding WHY you’re not getting there.”

Dana also reminds brands that this partnership approach extends to thinking about timing, purchasing practices, and payment terms.

“I think a lot of brands are used to working like, ‘I place an order, and I don’t know much about it.’ I don’t think that’s a way any brands should be working, but I would imagine that brands would want to know more about this. Timing has to be thought of. You’re not just placing a purchase order (PO), and here’s the due date. A PO really is



a contract when you take it at a legal level. There’s jargon that is added that gives people that way out. But how do you ensure that responsibility is taken, that ownership is taken? That’s how we do business, but I know there are so many people who don’t.”

“So we need a way to protect small businesses. Deposits and terms are some of the ways. **In the beginning, especially if it’s a new brand, they should be paying up front for those services.**”

In the end, Dana has some more succinct words of wisdom: **“It’s literally all about relationship-building.”**



Managed Grazing



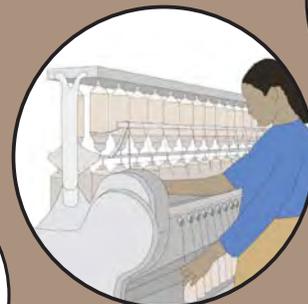
Scouring



Shearing



Dyeing + Finishing



Spinning



Knitting + Weaving

## CASE STUDY:

# Large Footwear and Apparel Brand

*Our conversation with the sustainability manager for an anonymous brand revealed key lessons for both brands and Fibershed Affiliates.*

**After some initial discussions**, this project officially launched with a day-long tour along the supply chain organized by the fibershed that brought the brand team and the fibershed team together. The brand team had a chance to see the farm, tour one of the manufacturing facilities connected to the project, try their hands at natural dyeing, and get to know the people in this local supply chain.

The anonymous brand representative and the fibershed alike agreed that this was an incredible way to launch the project. As this sustainability manager put it, “When we were able to do that [tour] day . . . it was such a good hands-on moment of seeing, this is where my color came from, this is where my fiber came from, and then seeing it come off our knitting machines at the factory—it was like, this is it!”

Overall, this brand representative believes, **“People underestimate the value of people in sustainability.** Everybody’s very interested in carbon sequestration and animal welfare and how many trees you’ve planted and water savings—that is all important, and we need to pay attention to it, but at the end of the day . . . if you potentially have people who are being taken advantage of in an externalized cost situation, that doesn’t make me feel good about what we’re making.”

*“I want to be able to shake hands with every person in the supply chain. That is my end goal, that is my passion project, that is what I may work on the rest of my life as an individual, whether or not it is with [this brand].”*

For that reason, this sustainability manager holds a straightforward and inspiring goal that fibersheds are uniquely suited to help meet:

While driven mainly by personal passion, the sustainability manager points out that this approach is critical for the brand’s efforts as well. They pointed to data that shows that consumers are not willing to pay more for just a sustainability label or a made-in-USA label alone. Overall, they feel, “To pay a premium for that [product], you need a premium story—and I think that that’s where this more local, domestic manufacturing comes into play.”

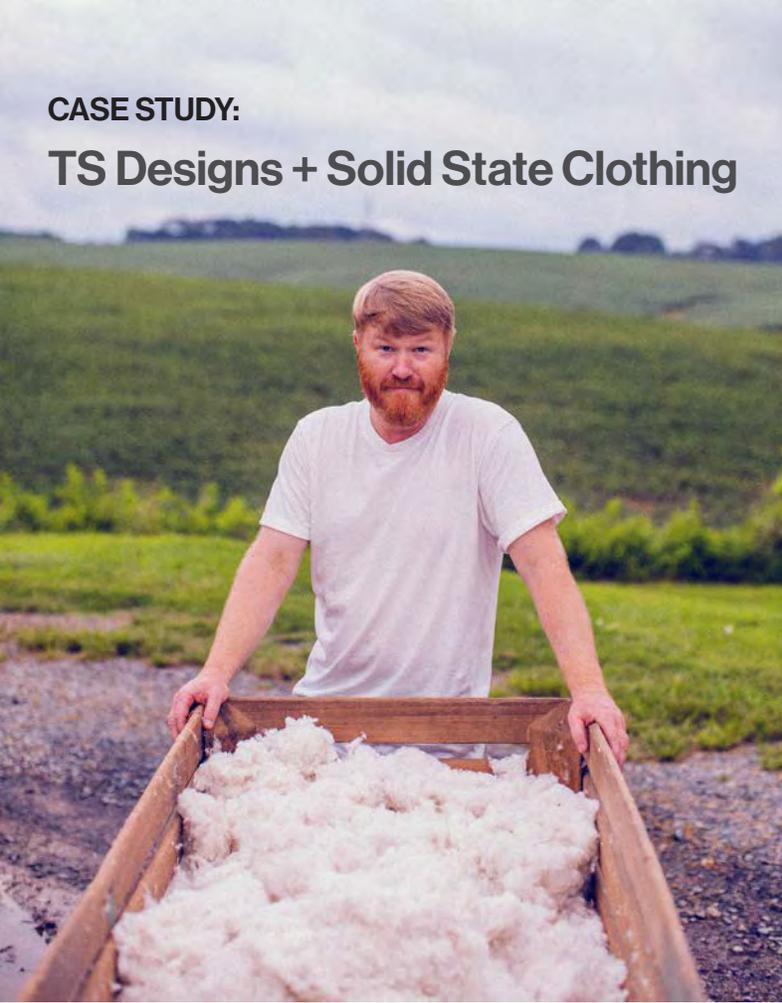
The local supply chain effort that this sustainability manager worked on with the fibershed was unfortunately put on hold by the COVID-19 pandemic. Looking back, they shared some key reflections that will hopefully help inform other brands and restart this project in the future. Reflecting on barriers, they recalled that, “The very first initial barrier . . . was just establishing what the supply chain actually looks like. If [the brand] is at the front and a farm is at the backside, what are the steps along the way that we need to take to get there? And where can we customize that a little bit?”

The supply chain tour day was a major step in overcoming this first barrier. As the project went along, they recalled, “The technical things became a barrier after a while—we just did not know how to work with the [local fiber] in the way that we were using it in our knitting machines.” To address this barrier, one key piece of advice is to connect the brand’s product engineers and technical people directly with the fiber producers early in the process, so they can communicate directly on technical issues.

Another key lesson the sustainability manager learned, was that “I think I should have allowed myself to be a little more nimble with how I wanted to see the end project. I had this grand vision in my head that we were going to do a [100% local fiber product] because I wanted it to be this very pure product. If I’d had the awareness at that moment to say, ‘OK, this is becoming too complicated in this form, maybe we could switch to a [simpler product],’ just to get the story, the proof of concept DONE and on the ground, that probably would have been beneficial.”

## CASE STUDY:

# TS Designs + Solid State Clothing



**Eric Henry, President of TS Designs**, has been a decades-long believer in the importance of rebuilding local supply chains. His perspectives offer key insights for brands, smaller apparel makers, and fibersheds.

Based in North Carolina, TS Designs has evolved from a screenprinter to a maker and printer of premium, made-in-the-USA t-shirts that are grown and manufactured with fully traceable supply chains. As such, TS Designs sits in between farmers and larger buyers who purchase their shirts for employees, events, or their own lines.

*Photos by TS Designs*



Eric emphasizes what should be self-evident in apparel supply chains, but is too often forgotten:

“The farmer has zero say in the price of a product, and that’s the most basic thing we have to fix in agriculture. The farmer has to have a voice and has to make a living. They are the most important part of the conversation!”

And, Eric adds, **“The best people to fix that are the brands. They have to have a relationship with the farmer, and they have to support what the farmer charges.”**

To allow this shift, Eric says, “You’re going to have to have patience and a long-term perspective”

However, Eric believes that the COVID-19-induced supply chain disruptions will bring change in this regard: “COVID-19 destroyed those global supply chains. What we learned from COVID is how much resiliency we need to move forward.”

To demonstrate how local supply chains can build that resiliency, TS Designs has launched its own small brand, Solid State Clothing, and developed the **10,000 Pounds of Cotton Project**, or the 10K Project for short.

Through these linked projects, TS Designs committed to buying 10,000 pounds of cotton at a fair price directly from third-generation farmer Andrew Burleson in New London, North Carolina. TS Designs then crowdfunded the manufacturing of the t-shirts from Burleson’s cotton, and in late





summer 2021, the t-shirts were manufactured and sent to those who had bought into the project.

The 10K Project offers a key pilot for both brands and fibersheds seeking creative models for pricing and sourcing. As Eric says, “With the 10K Project, we’re proving all of this can be done.”

Reflecting on earlier experiences where he functioned more as a supplier to brands, Eric has additional lessons to share. As he puts it, “A small fibershed wants to sell the fiber, and they get excited, but then they get caught in a trap where they overcommit and under deliver. It’s tough to say no when you have an opportunity to get yourself into the spotlight.”

Drawing from his own experiences with an earlier brand partnership, Eric encourages fibersheds to understand their own value and ensure that their interests are protected: “It’s true with any business relationship where you have one side with more power . . . you need to have more due diligence with the contracts. My fault was not having an agreement where we both knew what the expectations were.”

Nowadays, Eric says, he asks tough questions to ensure if a project is really viable. “I like to talk about the worst case scenarios and what the brand is bringing to the table, what happens when I can’t deliver, what happens if my supply chain breaks, if

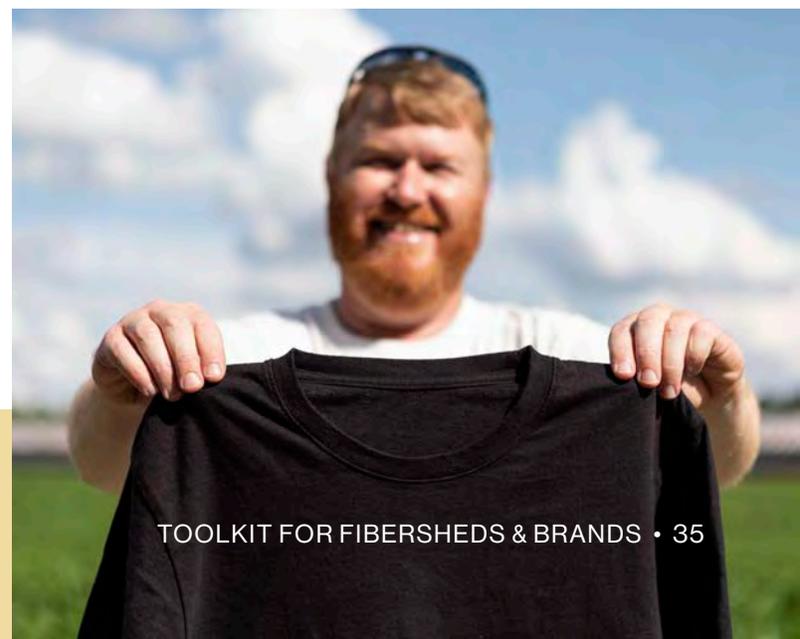
it doesn’t get shipped on time,” he says. “Better to have those discussions now. Understand the things you don’t have control of, for example the farmer doesn’t have control over the weather. Take the time to make sure the brand knows the potential for failures and how you will handle the failures.”

“And sometimes,” he concludes, “you just have to make the call that the project just isn’t a fit, even if you do everything perfect.”

In the end, Eric reflects that brands and fibersheds have a key shared interest: “We can all be in different places, but let’s all agree on where we want to go to have a more resilient supply chain, a more equitable supply chain.”

For TS Designs, the best business relationships start with **“understanding the value of the relationship and seeing where you can meet on equal ground so that both sides gain from the relationship.”**

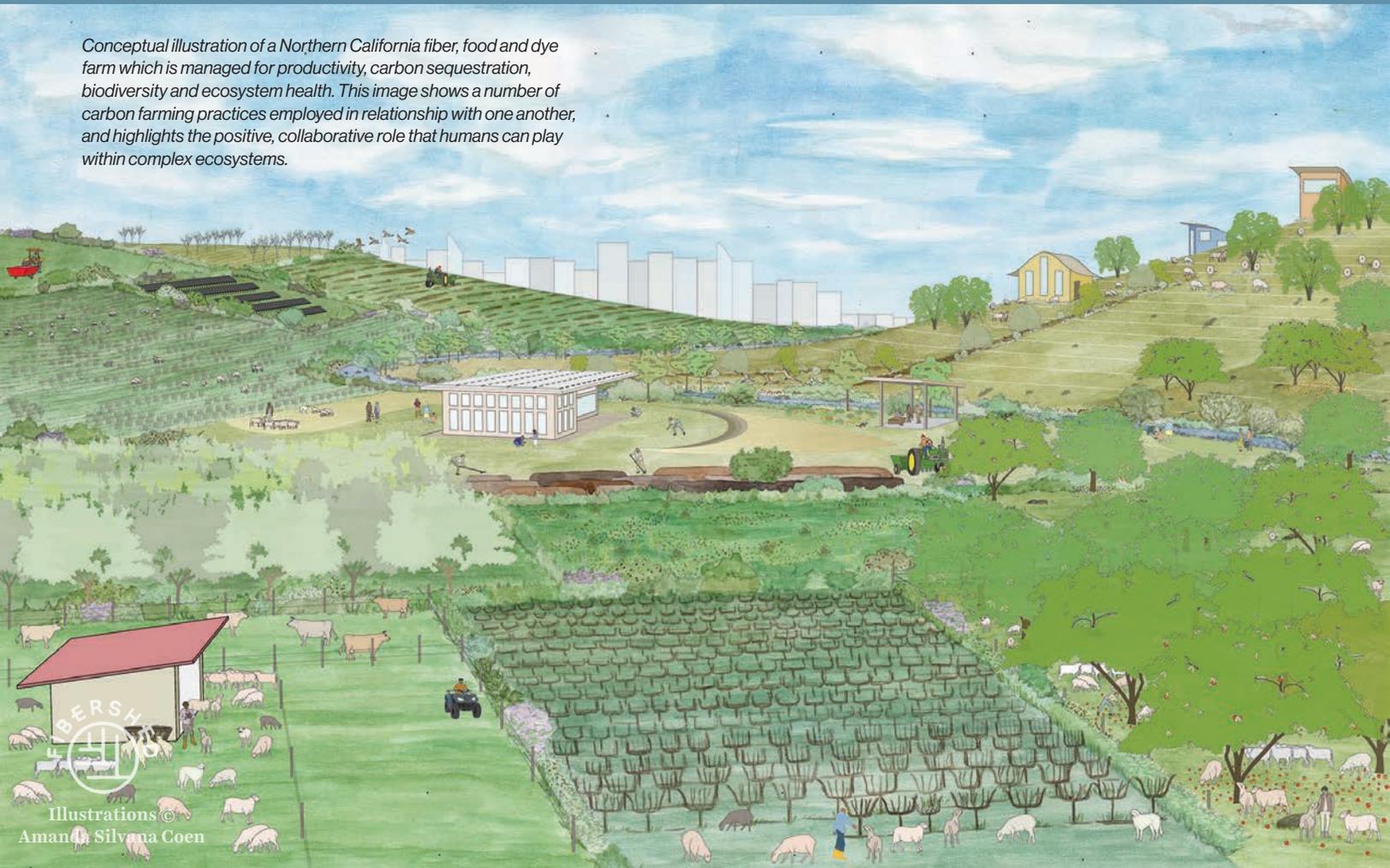
*Photos by TS Designs*



# Ways that a brand could start supporting a fibershed

- *Invest in fiber processing equipment*
- *Guarantee the purchase of a certain amount of fiber at a living wage from the farmer*
- *Provide other kinds of financial support to projects, such as grants from a brand's charitable arm*
- *Create a collective with other brands*
- *Sponsor an existing farm*
- *Develop a brand farm and educational center*
- *Sponsor a studio space or other R&D facility for work with local fibers*
- *Support your internal team to put more time into local fiber pilots*
- *Allow the fibershed to use your logo on the pitch deck*

Conceptual illustration of a Northern California fiber, food and dye farm which is managed for productivity, carbon sequestration, biodiversity and ecosystem health. This image shows a number of carbon farming practices employed in relationship with one another, and highlights the positive, collaborative role that humans can play within complex ecosystems.



# Conclusion

**Reflecting on their project** with a local fibershed, the sustainability manager from the anonymous brand highlighted what is maybe the biggest opportunity of all for fibersheds: shifting the apparel sector overall to a more experiential approach that is the antithesis of fast fashion.

As they put it: **“In the efforts of sustainability, how do we continue to operate in this capitalist system where we are always trying to make more product?”** Instead, the question should be: **“How do we sell EXPERIENCES that are valuable to the consumer?”** Could you spend \$80 on a 2-year package of resoleable shoes? Can we sell a natural dye kit? How do you engage a consumer to make the product once and spend the money twice?”

Brands are coming to terms with the fact that the current model of one-way disposable fashion is impossible, and fibersheds are perfectly placed to help them identify opportunities to create meaningful experiences, and long-lasting products, from soil-based and renewable natural fibers. We hope this toolkit will set both parties on the road to new connections and partnerships.



*In this conceptual illustration of a Southern California cotton farm, cover crops are planted without tilling and allowed to grow and feed the soil. At the end of the season, the cover crop is terminated and cotton is planted directly into the residue. Diverse and healthy plant roots support diverse and healthy soil communities. Together they provide pathways for water, carbon, and other nutrients to enter the soil, which acts like a sponge and keeps them cycling where they are needed. (Illustration by Amanda Silvana Coen)*



*In this conceptual illustration of a Northern California ranch, ewes first graze in a perennial alfalfa field and give birth to lambs. Together, they then move to vineyards, where they are sheared and graze the alleys. When the grape leaves open, the lambs go to pasture and the ewes go to graze fire-prone landscapes. Integrating sheep and cover crops into vineyards and other cropping systems can cost-effectively increase carbon sequestration, nutrient storage, and biological activity in the soil as well as reduce needs for synthetic inputs. (Illustration by Amanda Silvana Coen)*

## Acknowledgements

**Special thanks to the following individuals who agreed to be interviewed for this project:**

- **Dana Davis**
- **Sharon Donnan**
- **Peggy Hart**
- **Eric Henry**
- **Taylor Johnston**
- **Laura Sansone**
- **Shannon Welsh**
- **Krystle Moody Wood**
- **Sustainability Manager, Anonymous Brand**

# Appendix

## Fibershed Project Intake Form

Please tell us about your project and we will be in touch to discuss it further.

Company name:

Contact Name:

Email address:

Telephone:

Website:

Briefly describe your project:

Please let us know your timeline and the season and year you hope to launch:

Type of product and quantity you are looking to produce (for example: t-shirts, sweaters, socks, yardage)

Fiber content per style (cotton, wool, hemp, recycled fiber etc):

Specialty services requested:

- Supply chain management
- Marketing
- Natural dyeing
- Certifications

Attachments:

If you have a line sheet, color reference chips, or any other helpful documents, please upload them here.

Select files or drag and drop files here

How did you find out about our fibershed?

## **NONDISCLOSURE AGREEMENT**

This Nondisclosure Agreement (this “Agreement”) is made and entered into as of \_\_\_\_\_, by and between \_\_\_\_\_, with its principal place of business at \_\_\_\_\_ (“Company”), and \_\_\_\_\_, with its principal place of business at \_\_\_\_\_ (“Recipient”).

1. **Purpose.** Company and Recipient wish to explore a business opportunity of mutual interest and, in connection with this opportunity, Company may disclose to Recipient certain confidential business information which Company desires Recipient to treat as confidential.

2. **“Confidential Information”** means any information disclosed to Recipient by Company, either directly or indirectly in writing, orally or by inspection of tangible objects, including without limitation documents, drawings, designs, examples, and prototypes. Confidential Information may also include information disclosed to Company by third parties. Confidential Information shall not, however, include any information which Recipient can establish (i) was publicly known and made generally available in the public domain prior to the time of disclosure to Recipient by Company; (ii) becomes publicly known and made generally available after disclosure to Recipient by Company through no action or inaction of Recipient; or (iii) is in the possession of Recipient, without confidentiality restrictions, at the time of disclosure by Company as shown by Recipient’s files and records immediately prior to the time of disclosure.

3. **Non-use and Non-disclosure.** Recipient agrees not to use any Confidential Information for any purpose except to evaluate and engage in discussions concerning a potential business relationship between Recipient and Company. Recipient agrees not to disclose any Confidential Information to third parties or to employees of Recipient, except to those employees who are required to have the information in order to evaluate or engage in discussions concerning the contemplated business relationship.

4. **Maintenance of Confidentiality.** Recipient agrees that it shall take all reasonable measures to protect the secrecy of, and avoid disclosure and unauthorized use of, the Confidential Information. Without limiting the foregoing, Recipient shall take at least those measures that Recipient takes to protect its own most highly confidential information and shall have its employees who have access to Confidential Information sign a non-use and non-disclosure agreement in content substantially similar to the provisions hereof, prior to any disclosure of Confidential Information to such employees. Recipient shall not make any copies of Confidential Information unless such copies are previously approved in writing by the Company. Recipient shall reproduce Company’s proprietary rights notices (including but not limited to copyright and trademark notices) on any such approved copies, in the same manner in which such notices were set forth in or on the original. Recipient shall immediately notify Company in the event of any unauthorized use or disclosure of the Confidential Information.

5. **No Obligation.** Nothing herein shall obligate Company or Recipient to proceed with any transaction between them, and each party reserves the right, in its sole discretion, to terminate the discussions contemplated by this Agreement concerning the business opportunity.

6. No Warranty. ALL CONFIDENTIAL INFORMATION IS PROVIDED “AS IS.” COMPANY MAKES NO WARRANTIES, EXPRESS, IMPLIED OR OTHERWISE, REGARDING ITS ACCURACY OR COMPLETENESS.

7. Return of Materials. All documents and other tangible objects containing or representing Confidential Information and all copies thereof that are in the possession of Recipient shall be and remain the property of Company and shall be promptly returned to Company upon Company’s request.

8. No License. Nothing in this Agreement is intended to grant any rights to Recipient under any patent or copyright of Company, nor shall this Agreement grant Recipient any rights in or to Confidential Information except as expressly set forth herein.

9. Term. This Agreement shall survive until such time as all Confidential Information disclosed hereunder becomes publicly known and made generally available through no action or inaction of Recipient.

10. Remedies. Recipient agrees that any violation or threatened violation of this Agreement will cause irreparable injury to the Company, entitling Company to obtain injunctive relief in addition to all legal remedies.

11. Recipient Information. Company does not wish to receive any confidential information from Recipient, and Company assumes no obligation, either express or implied, with respect to any information disclosed by Recipient.

12. Miscellaneous. This Agreement shall bind and inure to the benefit of the parties hereto and their successors and assigns. This Agreement shall be governed by the laws of the State of \_\_\_\_\_, without reference to conflict of laws principles. This document contains the entire agreement between the parties with respect to the subject matter hereof. Any failure to enforce any provision of this Agreement shall not constitute a waiver thereof or of any other provision hereof. This Agreement may not be amended, nor any obligation waived, except by a writing signed by both parties hereto.

COMPANY

RECIPIENT

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Title: \_\_\_\_\_

Title: \_\_\_\_\_

**Note:** This is a contract between brands and Fibershed (non-profit), pre-committing to a fiber supply, consulting services for textile development, and education. It can be adapted by other service providers and fiber producers.

## MEMORANDUM OF UNDERSTANDING

This Memorandum of Understanding (“MOU”) is made as of DATE, between BRAND and The California Climate & Cotton Coalition (“C4”), a project of Fibershed.

BRAND and C4 mutually agree to the following:

### GENERAL CONDITIONS

- A. *Term of MOU.* The term of this MOU shall be from March 31, 2021 to March 31, 2022.
- B. *Governing Law.* This MOU shall be construed under the laws of the State of California.

### PURPOSE OF MOU

The California Cotton and Climate Coalition team provides agricultural and textile education that generates the foundation for economic commitments between growers and brands to be crafted. This MOU outlines the 2021 economic agreement between brands and grower to provide a cotton lint price that is designed to support the in-field costs of reducing and eliminating synthetic nitrogen, eliminating fungicide, forming beds for strip tillage, cover crop seed, irrigation of cover crop, and organic termination of the cover crop while supporting a five-year process that will work to combine regenerative principles within organic certified land for the production of cotton lint that is targeted to support the highest level of ecosystem function.

### CONFIDENTIALITY

Each Party agrees that it will keep confidential and will not disclose, divulge, or use for any purpose to any third party any confidential information obtained, under the terms of this MOU, including the terms and existence of this MOU, unless such confidential information (a) is known or becomes known to the public in general (other than as a result of a breach of this Section 8), (b) is required to be disclosed by law, provided, that Each Party promptly notifies to the other of such disclosure and takes reasonable steps to minimize the extent of any such required disclosure, or (c) is required to be disclosed by C4 to its cooperative members for it to perform its obligations under this MOU.

### METHOD OF PRICING, PAYMENT, AND PRE-FINANCE RETURN

*Return based on the following Working Calendar:*

Harvest Month:	October 2021
Gin Start Date (early):	November 01, 2021
Ginning End Date:	November 15, 2021
Classing:	November 22, 2021
Spunlab Laydown Planning:	December 13, 2021
*Assumption: both harvests consolidated & stored at one preferred merchant	
Ship date:	December 23, 2021
Lint arrival date:	December 30, 2021
Production Start:	January 03, 2022
Production End:	January 31, 2021-February 14, 2022

**BRAND YARN ORDER DATE: NOVEMBER 15, 2021**

The calendar dates above are best-case scenarios based on landscape data collected previous to this contract. C4 team members (with NAME as lead) will work to maintain this calendar to the best of their ability and keep brands informed of any shifts in this working calendar so as to inform their downstream partners.

- A. NAME trial cotton lint is priced at \$PRICE per pound; all 2021 purchase orders will be based upon and will utilize this lint price.
- B. C4 Brands will be provided a purchase order template with pricing by C4 Technical Textile Developer NAME no later than September 1, 2021.
- C. C4 Brands will prepare purchase orders for one or more of the following:
  - a. CRS\* spec lint
  - b. Non-CRS lint (in-field cotton vestige)
  - c. 30 single CRS\* knitting yarn
  - d. 40 single CRS\* domestic weaving yarn
- D. Purchase orders will be received at NAME (for yarn) or NAME (for lint), or NAME (for in-field lint); no later than November 15th, 2021.
- E. Individual Brand costs of not sending purchase orders by November 15, 2021, will total 50% of the total costs of their percentage share of C4 verified cotton lint and will be payable to Fibershed by November 20, 2021.

CRS is shorthand for Combed Ring Spun and defined by the following technical specification provided by NAME. To ensure quality combed ring spun yarns, NAME will not order any lint that does not meet the following specifications unless otherwise directed by C4:

- GRADE:** 41 or better  
(meaning 21's and 11's also ok)
- LEAF:** 4 and less
- MICRONAIRE:** 4.1 - 5.0 per bale  
(average of 4.4 - 4.7)
- LENGTH:** 1.10 min
- UNIFORMITY:** 81.0 min
- STRENGTH:** 27.0 min per bale / 29.0 avg

No extraneous matter (bark, grass, seed coat fragments, etc.)

Non-CRS is shorthand for any fiber that does not meet the above specification. This can be used for bedding applications, or other non-combed ring spun yarn production.

**C4 COALITION WORK OUTLINE APRIL 1, 2021 – MARCH 31, 2022**

C4 Coalition Roles & Responsibilities will be conducted to educate, research, and support the following activities (Statements of Work Available Upon Request):

- NAME: Coordination of group meetings, development of storytelling narratives, and development of educational opportunities: \$AMOUNT

- NAME: Textile development for Domestic 40 singles and wovens (as applicable); alternative work (if BRAND don't move forward on a 40's domestic single); support C4 on new brand lint and yarn commitments to close commitment gap on farm and maximize pre-competitive opportunities to share cost and processing efficiencies: \$AMOUNT
- NAME: Farm-to-yarn logistics, textile development for 30's single knitting yarn, all yarn production management: \$AMOUNT
- Graphic design services and collective storytelling: \$AMOUNT
- Total: \$AMOUNT

**Exhibit A**

Quarterly donations the following:

- Q1 Due April 9, 2021, \$AMOUNT/brand
- Q2 Due June 30, 2021, \$AMOUNT/brand
- Q3 Due Sept 30, 2021, \$AMOUNT/brand
- Q4 Due Dec 30, 2021, \$AMOUNT/brand

**GOAL OF FUTURE C4 FEES**

The C4 technical team will work to generate a minimum of a 25% price reduction in quarterly fees in each subsequent year (2022, 23, 24, 25); with the intention that the technical team has educated and built capacity within each brand to manage logistics and technical textile development acumen. The C4 technical team will evaluate and work to generate a "menu of services" in years 2-5; based on what textile development functions individual brands require in future years.

**CURRENT C4 FEES & PURCHASE ORDER AGREEMENT**

BRAND agrees to submit a purchase order for (please fill in weights for CRS lint, Non-CRS Lint, and or 40 single domestic weaving yarn)

by November 15, 2021, to (please circle) NAME, NAME (for CRS lint), NAME (Non-CRS lint) and acknowledges if the purchase order is not submitted on time that a fee of 50% of the total costs of \_\_\_\_\_ pounds of C4 verified cotton lint and will be payable to Fibershed by November 20, 2021.

BRAND agrees to C4 four quarterly donations made to Fibershed by the dates noted above in Exhibit A.

IN WITNESS WHEREOF, BRAND hereto has executed this C4 Program Support Agreement as of the day and year first above written.

**BRAND**

Name:  
Title:  
Signature:

**C4**

Name:  
Title:  
Signature:

Date:

Date:

# About the Authors

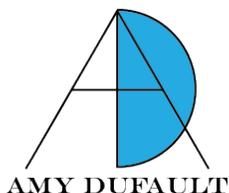
## Amy DuFault



**Amy DuFault** is a sustainable textile industry veteran that has written for the past 15 years for media including *Ecouterre* and *Participant Media* to *The Guardian*, *Fashionista* and *Taproot Magazine*. Currently, she is the Sustainability + Communications Director for the leading U.S. natural dye retailer + production house **Botanical Colors**. Amy also consults on communications and sustainable strategies and has created + moderated events for the **RISD NatureLab**, the **Stone Barns Center** as well as **Fibershed**, author **Elizabeth Cline** and more.

In addition to being the former editor of *EcoSalon* and co-owner of a boutique, she's repped for dozens of sustainable fashion designers and admits that repping actually made her realize how much emerging designers and brands needed help communicating authentically.

She currently runs the **Southeastern New England Fibershed** and is actively creating regional supply chains that support Massachusetts and Rhode Island textile businesses. She describes herself as an international switchboard operator connecting good people.



AMY DUFAULT

## Sarah R. Kelley



**Sarah R. Kelley** is the Principal of **Common Threads Consulting**. She serves as Consultant/ Project Director to Sustainable Agriculture and Food Systems Funders (SAFSF) for its **Special Project on Sustainable Fiber and Textiles**, and she is the lead author of **The Fibers Roadmap: Integrated Capital Opportunities to Support Revitalization of U.S.-Grown Fiber, Textiles, and Leather**.

Other recent work includes serving as lead researcher and author for Textile Exchange's **Regenerative Agriculture Landscape Analysis**; conducting interview-driven analysis for the **Guidelight Strategies/Patagonia regenerative agriculture report**, with a focus on racial equity in regenerative ag; strategy development for a family foundation seeking to defend environmental health progress from libertarian and corporate influence; and strategic planning and impact assessment for foundation and nonprofit clients.



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