When it comes to cotton production, sustainability is in the water.

It all comes down to water use. Whether it’s in our own personal lives or the fashion brands we patron, lowering our water use is a significant part of how we all reduce our environmental impact. And it matters in the materials these fashion brands decide to source.

Contrary to popular belief, cotton is not a water-intensive crop. It has been bred to be drought tolerant, and in many parts of the world, it relies solely on rainfall. In fact, the two-thirds of cotton grown in the U.S. is not-irrigated at all.
Today, U.S. growers use moisture sensors and below-ground probes to track and map where water is needed throughout their fields.

They use irrigation scheduling technology and drip irrigation to ensure water is soaked into the ground. Thanks to these innovations and technologies U.S. cotton growers have reduced water use by 79% over the past 35 years.

The U.S. Cotton Trust Protocol aims to tell the true story about U.S. cotton and its water use. With a growing demand for transparency about apparel brands’ and retailers’ water use and their raw materials, Trust Protocol sets a new standard for more sustainably grown cotton. It brings quantifiable and verifiable goals and measurement to sustainable cotton production and drives continuous improvement in key sustainability metrics.

The Trust Protocol underpins and verifies U.S. cotton’s sustainability progress through sophisticated data collection and independent third-party verification. Choosing Trust Protocol cotton will give brands and retailers the critical assurances they need that the cotton fiber element of their supply chain is more sustainably grown with less water, and lower environmental and social risk.

In the face of climate change, brands and retailers have set comprehensive sustainability plans with significant objectives for their businesses. And U.S. cotton growers are continuously improving their sustainability practices by employing new technologies to their lower water use.

“Currently Gap Inc. is 57% of the way towards our target of sourcing all our cotton from more sustainable sources by 2025, so we chose to partner with the Trust Protocol – as a preferred Textile Exchange supplier – to help us realize that goal,”

—Alice Harley, Director of Product Sustainability at Gap Inc.
“Continuous improvement in sustainability is important to Gap Inc., and with two-thirds of U.S. cotton not using any irrigation at all, we’re now on course to also show our progress against our water stewardship commitment. Gap Inc. is committed to furthering our commitment to sustainable cotton and now have access to a broad range of data to show our progress.”

This is why the Trust Protocol has ambitious sustainability goals for six metrics aligned with the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals, including an 18% water use reduction by 2025.

Growers have introduced systems like computer-driven moisture sensors to improve water efficiency by alerting them to periods of sufficient rainwater and showing them water-level measurements at a series of distances below ground level. These advancements enable growers to understand if their cotton is receiving enough water at all levels. By receiving a picture of the soil’s moisture, farmers can irrigate their fields more efficiently – if irrigation is needed at all. Almost two-thirds of U.S. cotton growers now employ some type of precision technology on their farms.

With access to the Trust Protocol, growers can continue to employ technology to improve their farm’s sustainability and water use with access to peer data to baseline their own operations, verified data year-over-year to measure their progress, and insights and best practices from across the industry to help them advance their work towards the Trust Protocol’s ambitious goals.

By signing up for the Trust Protocol, mills, merchants, brands and retailers will gain access to U.S. cotton with sustainability credentials proven via Field to Market: The Alliance for Sustainable Agriculture, measured via the Fieldprint Calculator and verified with Control Union Certifications.

The U.S. Cotton Trust Protocol has welcomed more than 300 brand, retailer, mill and manufacturer members since it opened enrollment six months ago. This includes Gap Inc. and its purpose-led lifestyle brands Old Navy, Gap, Banana Republic and Athleta as well as UK retailers Next Plc. and Byford. The Trust Protocol also has welcomed the first U.S. mills, the first members in Latin America, and Advance Denim, one of China’s top three denim manufacturers. These members have joined to better understand the sustainability progress of U.S. cotton and communicate that progress to customers.

It’s on all of us, growers, brands, retailers, and consumers to use water more responsibly. The U.S. Cotton Trust Protocol allows all of us to trust that we’re using less of our natural resources when it comes to the clothes we wear.

Become a member today at TrustUSCotton.org