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Rural California Report is a quarterly publication of the California Institute for Rural Studies. CIRS is an independent non-profit research and advocacy group which has studied rural issues and policies since 1977. The institute's goal is to build a society that is ecologically balanced, socially just, and economically sustainable. Toward these objectives, CIRS conducts research and public education projects, and works with individual activists in rural communities.

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New group reflects face of organic cotton industry

By Don Villarejo

REPRESENTATIVES FROM EVERY sector of the cotton industry — from growers to post-harvest processors, environmental organizations to farm worker advocates — came together at a historic meeting, the result of which was the formation of a new industry group, the National Organic Cotton Association (NOCA).

In addition to being the only group to represent the growing organic cotton industry, NOCA is the first national agricultural industry organization to formally include non-farm environmental leaders in its national leadership. This effort constitutes a major step toward getting diverse and sometimes competing constituencies to collaborate, and is the culmination of several years of work by CIRS Rural Toxics Project Director Will Allen.

Though there were a few tense moments, a spirit of compromise and cooperation prevailed among these different sectors who, in the past, had sometimes been at odds with one another. For the first time groups as disparate as growers from California and Texas, manufacturers such as Esprit and Patagonia, unions such as Teamsters Local 890 and the United Farm Workers, and environmentalists were able to transcend their differences and forge an alliance that reflects the true face of the organic cotton industry.

At the conference, held June 25 and 26 in Albuquerque, an interim board of directors was elected, with six members representing growers and agriculture, six members from the post-harvest side of the industry, and a single at-large member repre-

senting a non-farm environmental organization. Participants voted Tennessee grower Lorna McMahon interim president, and Eco-Sport founder Daniel Sanders interim vice-president.

One major accomplishment to come out of this weekend was the appointment of a national public advisory board which will assist the organization by providing policy recommendations. The board will also help with the important task of informing the general public about organic cotton.

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Finally, NOCA formed four member committees — marketing, certification/standards, administration, and vision — which convened meetings to develop specific work plans and elect chairpersons. The vision committee is unusual in that it addresses labor issues, as well as long-term planning and research direction. Looking toward the future, NOCA will assume responsibility for the next National Transitional Organic Cotton Conference, though no date has been set.

The next NOCA general membership meeting will be held at the Beltwide Cotton Conference, January 4-7, 1995, in San Antonio, Texas. For more information about NOCA, please contact Renée Robin, interim executive director, at (510) 649-1962. ♦