

**Nominated for the Public Eye Positive Award 2008  
by Helvetas:**

## **Hess Natur-Textilien GmbH**

Headquarters:	Butzbach, Germany
Sector:	Sales of natural textiles
Turnover:	€ 71 million (2006)
CEO:	Katrin Kinza and Wolf Lüdge
Owned by:	Arcandor AG (formerly KarstadtQuelle AG)
Employees:	286 (2006)

### **In Brief**

*The German mail-order firm Hess Natur has been a pioneer in the sales of natural textiles since 1976. Even then, founder Heinz Hess opposed the industrialized and destructive cultivation of raw materials, and in the past few years Hess Natur has intensified its commitment to social responsibility. From planting to stitching, Hess Natur ensures responsible trading and working conditions, and is dedicated to ecological production. The most recent example is the long-term commitment to purchase organically-grown cotton from Burkina Faso. Small farmers, who with the help of a Helvetas project were able to convert their fields to organically-controlled production according to EU standards, receive a fair-trade price for their product from Hess Natur. This secures not only the future of 2,000 small farmers but also the sustainable cultivation of the land.*

### **A company acts responsibly**

One hundred tons of organic cotton is enough to make 300,000 T-shirts. It could also be used for sweaters, jeans or skirts. Hess Natur bought this quantity of cotton in 2007 from farmers in Burkina Faso at a price far above the world market price. The cotton is certified by FLO, which in Switzerland corresponds to the standard of Max Havelaar. Since 2004, Hess Natur purchases cotton from organic producers in Burkina Faso and guarantees further purchases over the next three years.

The farmers switched to organic production just a few years ago. They were assisted by the Swiss aid organization Helvetas, which also arranged the collaboration with Hess Natur. The company had itself promoted the cultivation of organic cotton in the past, but now it relies on its partnership with Helvetas. Inspired by the collaboration, Hess Natur funded a literacy program in Burkina Faso

that helps girls in particular obtain access to education. In addition, the mail-order house sells soap made from karite butter, provided by a woman's cooperative in Burkina Faso.

Ninety-eight percent of Hess's textile assortment comes from organically-controlled cultivation. For the processing of the natural fibers Hess relies on environmentally-sound procedures. A label on each piece of clothing informs the customer about the entire production process. As a member of the Fair Wear Foundation, Hess Natur is a European pioneer in social standards as well. Its social guidelines are based on the labor norms of the International Labor Organization (ILO), including a living wage, decent working conditions, regulated working hours, respect for the freedom of association, a ban on child and forced labor, and a ban on discrimination. These standards also apply to suppliers.

### **Results**

Hess Natur's purchase guarantee provides over 2,000 farmers in Burkina Faso with a fair income, allowing them to sustainably cultivate their fields. Many of the farmers plant just a small piece of land, and they are able to do without toxic chemicals because of their conversion to organic methods. Conversion results in smaller yields for the first few years, but the farmers also save money by using less pesticide and artificial fertilizer, which are big cost factors. Using conventional methods, cotton plants can be sprayed and fertilized up to 30 times in some areas. Cotton cultivation uses 2.4 percent of cultivated land worldwide, but devours 25 percent of all pesticides used. For organic cultivation in Burkina Faso, farmers use dung and compost, allowing them to work in chemical-free fields. Particularly for women, this is an opportunity to generate an income. In the coming years, Hess Natur hopes to promise to buy even more cotton from the farmers in Burkina Faso.

### **Next Steps**

Hess Natur strives to reach optimal ecological conditions in all areas. Some wool, silk and linen are being produced in an organically-controlled and animal-friendly manner. Here, Hess Natur's commitment could be extended. And there is still work to be done regarding social responsibility. Hess Natur should purchase more raw materials on fair-trade terms and should mark its products with a FLO quality seal. Furthermore, Hess Natur belongs to the KarstadtQuelle Group since 2001. As a successful pioneer, Hess Natur could and should advocate the observance of ecological and social standards in the parent company, where it would make sense if the same minimum standards were applied.

### **Further Information:**

- [http://www.helvetas.ch/wEnglish/organic\\_cotton/welcome\\_page.asp](http://www.helvetas.ch/wEnglish/organic_cotton/welcome_page.asp)