



REGENERATIVE
COTTON
STANDARD

THE REGENERATIVE COTTON STANDARD[®] (RCS)

by AbTF

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1 About the Regenerative Cotton Standard

The Regenerative Cotton Standard (RCS) of the Aid by Trade Foundation (AbTF) aims to support RCS-associated farmers in:

- Building up resilience against the effects of climate change
- Diversifying food sources and income opportunities
- Preserving and improving agricultural landscapes
- Ensuring the respectful use of natural resources

Managing Entities, whose role is to organise RCS-associated farmers and to ensure the traceability of their cotton, are supported in:

- Qualification of farm trainers
- Access to project funding
- Bringing a credible, innovative, and traceable product to the market

Below is an overview of the Regenerative Cotton Standard (RCS), followed by a more detailed description.

1.1 Background

The Aid by Trade Foundation (AbTF) developed its Regenerative Cotton Standard (RCS) specifically for small-scale cotton farmers in the Global South, who represent the vast majority of all cotton producers in the world.

To create RCS, AbTF built on more than 18 years of experience gathered through its Cotton made in Africa (CmiA) standard, which focusses on small-scale cotton farmers in Sub-Saharan Africa. With even more holistic and agroecological criteria, RCS is also applicable beyond the context of CmiA.

Small-scale family farmers are severely impacted by climate change, affecting both their crop yields and income due to erratic weather patterns and environmental instability. Many of these farmers face the dual challenges of limited access to essential resources and a lack of knowledge about resilient farming practices. Sustainable farming programs often overlook their unique needs and priorities, leaving them underrepresented in decision-making processes and hindering tailored solutions. Managing Entities supporting these farmers must effectively manage and navigate the complex task of communicating and sharing information with this diverse group, requiring expertise in both technical and interpersonal aspects.

AbTF wants to use its expertise to support Managing Entities in working with RCS-associated farmer groups. A Managing Entity is responsible for enabling the preconditions for sustainable development, for engagement and information exchange with the farmers, and for providing access to suitable inputs, if required. Managing Entities that have already obtained a CmiA certificate are offered the option of adding on an RCS-specific verification. Where Managing Entities have not yet obtained a CmiA certificate, they undergo a verification covering the complete set of criteria and indicators, including CmiA's social and environmental criteria, as well as the holistic set of RCS regenerative criteria at the field level.

As the term "Regenerative Agriculture" is not officially defined or protected, RCS defines it as follows:

Actively creating co-benefits in interaction between nature, people, society, and the economy to bring agricultural systems into a better state than they are currently in. To achieve and verify this, it is key to combine suitable and available traditional knowledge and farming approaches with scientific insights and state-of-the-art digital technology.



1.2 Philosophy and Value Proposition

1.2.1 RCS Philosophy

- The Aid by Trade Foundation is convinced that a more definite shift towards a net positive impact of agriculture is necessary to meet the global challenges which especially small-scale farmers in the Global South are facing today.
- The philosophy behind RCS is based on the premise that cotton can only be produced sustainably if farmed in a way that fosters soil health.
- As cotton is not a stand-alone commodity, RCS targets the entire crop rotation as well as other relevant parts of the production system—such as field margins, areas connecting (nearby) fields, and farm animals—always with the goal of making the whole farming system more resilient in both ecological and economic terms.
- RCS is a both process - and outcome-oriented framework, meaning that proof of continuous improvement towards a positive impact is key.
- Within the RCS system, management of a transition towards regenerative agriculture needs to be adapted to local conditions, including with regard to culture, society, topography, and the climate.
- Involving farmers in prioritisation and planning while building on the knowledge of local farming communities is therefore an essential pillar of RCS. Knowledge of traditional ways of farming is expected to complement scientific findings and support acceptance, effectivity, and adoption rates.
- These elements may require not only investments from all sides into a system change but also a mindset change for Managing Entities as well as for members of the farming communities.

1.2.2 RCS Value Proposition

Advantages for RCS-Associated Farmers

RCS aims to regenerate and return degraded land to production, meaning that farmers could reuse abandoned agricultural lands close to their homesteads, reducing the travel time to their fields and thereby making more time available for targeted interventions.

The framework will support farmers in making better use of available resources and in reducing or replacing synthetic inputs, thereby contributing to a healthier working and living environment.

Farmers gain market access via sales of cotton from a holistic production system, which encourages the optimum use of resources, enhances peer-learning opportunities as well as the development of local businesses, and therefore strengthens overall farm resilience while improving profitability.

RCS honours farmers' experience, handed-down knowledge, ideas, and priorities as well as local circumstances and traditions.

Advantages for the Managing Entity

The Managing Entity can offer a new and innovative product to cotton traders. It has the chance to qualify its extension staff through AbTF and their partners, gain access to innovative data tools, and more.

The farming communities associated with RCS are expected to increase and stabilise over time due to the support of RCS-affiliated local business units as well as through the use of formerly abandoned land closer to the villages.

Advantages for Buyers and Traders

Buyers and traders can support sustainable farming operations that have a unique speciality and are backed by a voluntary standard system with credible verification mechanisms and a good monitoring, evaluation, and learning system. They also have the opportunity to obtain Hard Identity Preserved cotton and even crop rotation products, if desired, from a trusted source.



2 Overview

This chapter summarises the most relevant points regarding RCS.

1. Scope

- The RCS standard includes environmental, social, animal welfare, and management criteria.
- RCS covers the entire farming system (all field crops) associated with cotton cultivation as well as field margins, areas connecting RCS-managed fields in close proximity to each other, and livestock kept by farmers practising RCS or grazing in areas managed according to RCS.
- RCS is not limited to a specific geographical location as long as it is part of a small-scale cotton farming system.
- Organic farming or other sustainable farming certification schemes are not a prerequisite.

2. Managing Entity

- RCS requires a Managing Entity that
 - a) delivers training and, if such a system was in place before becoming an RCS candidate, inputs¹ to farmers;
 - b) serves as a gateway for verification;
 - c) provides an RCS focal person to interact with AbTF, farmers, verification staff, etc.; and
 - d) delivers self-assessments, data for the baseline, develops a continuous regeneration plan, and monitors training success, input use, and management plans.
- A Managing Entity could be a cotton company or ginnery, a self-sustaining organisation closely involved in the cotton sector, or a professionally organised co-operative of farmers. In any case, it is mandatory for qualified extension agents or people with sufficient agricultural knowledge to be available, in an adequate ratio, to the farmers the Managing Entity works with.
- A Managing Entity must be willing and able to support the implementation of RCS.

3. Farmers and Target Areas

- RCS works exclusively with groups of associated small-scale farmers.
- Farmers that belong to an RCS group must live and farm close enough together, so that peer exchange is easy and areas between fields can be considered for biodiversity measures.
- Areas around homesteads belonging to RCS-associated farmers are included in the sense that all available leftover organic and carbon-containing waste should be recycled as far as culturally acceptable.

4. Irrigation

- RCS cotton is produced in a very water-efficient manner. Where irrigation was not used before starting with RCS, cotton must continue being produced without irrigation from surface-water or groundwater sources. Where an irrigated cultivation system was already in place before starting with RCS, efficiency measures must be taken to reduce the use of and dependency on surface water and groundwater.

5. Traceability

- Only cotton produced according to RCS can be sold as RCS cotton.
- RCS seed cotton must be fully traceable from the marketplace onwards.
- RCS-verified cotton must be stored and processed separately from any other cotton in the ginnery.

¹ If there is no system of pre-financing inputs, it is essential that the farmers document which inputs have been used in which amounts. This would have to be monitored by the Managing Entity, and aggregated reports must be made available to AbTF. Spot checks of samples in a laboratory could be required to prove that no prohibited substances were used.



6. Self-Assessment, Independent Verification, and Monitoring

- RCS is a voluntary standard system which is verified by an independent third party focussing on the production of seed cotton.
- The indicators are divided into core (mandatory) and improvement (complementary) categories.
- The Managing Entity is responsible for monitoring progress and annually updating the continuous regeneration plan.
- Regular verification missions will be performed by independent verification bodies to guarantee the reliability of the standard and to verify whether RCS-associated farmers meet the standard's requirements. Successfully verified Managing Entities will then receive a Regenerative Cotton Standard certificate.

2.1 RCS Impact Areas at a Glance

RCS is grouped around ten principles that cover several criteria, each associated with measurable indicators. Each of these ten principles is supported by one of three enabling requirements.

The enabling requirements are:

- Responsible management
- Community engagement
- Combination of traditional knowledge and science

It is the impact that matters, and the farmers play a vital role in making it happen. Solutions may be specific to a particular location or context. For many of the field-related indicators, RCS-associated farmers can set their own priorities and decide on their own way to meet the criteria. They will have their say on how the Managing Entity can best support them in achieving continuous and tangible regenerative improvements.



Details on the three enabling requirements and the ten principles can be found in chapter 4.



2.2 Eligibility

A Managing Entity and RCS-associated farmers' groups must be ready to work according to RCS core criteria from the beginning of the process.

Any CmiA-verified Managing Entity can integrate RCS as an add-on verification if some or all of its associated farmers are ready to take on the additional process.

If a Managing Entity is a cotton company or ginnery, it must fulfil ginnery-level CmiA criteria in addition to RCS criteria.

Certificates obtained under other standard systems, e.g. IFOAM's family of standards for organic or other regenerative field-level standards, can facilitate the process but do not necessarily fulfil all RCS criteria. Details on equivalence and applicability can be found in the Excel version of the RCS matrix, which is made available to RCS candidates.

- Plots must be deforestation-free from 2020-12-31, in line with EU deforestation regulations².
- Centrally managed farms with produce entirely for sale and permanent staff are not eligible.

2.3 The Role of the Managing Entity

The Managing Entity, which can be a cotton company or another actor in the cotton/textile supply chain, is responsible for managing the implementation of the RCS standard.

The Managing Entity has an overview of the farmer base and has qualified, regularly trained extension staff to inform, engage, and train all RCS-associated farmers, either directly or via a lead farmer or training cascade. The Managing Entity liaises with individual farmers or farmers' groups and, if possible and common in the regional context, offers input pre-financing schemes to RCS-associated farmers. Finally, depending on its position in the cotton supply chain, the Managing Entity also supports the collection and purchase of raw cotton and other applicable agricultural products, if applicable.

It is also in the position to apply for and administer community project funding through the Aid by Trade Foundation or third parties, implementing these projects together with RCS-associated farmers.

RCS requires a high level of self-organisation and data management by the Managing Entity. This includes a strategic approach, which involves identifying the most relevant/critical areas for RCS-associated farmers and the Managing Entity, analysing the risks and opportunities for these identified points, and developing a strategy for improving the situation over time. The Managing Entity has to demonstrate responsible management and governance with regard to RCS-associated farmers, e.g. in developing and promoting policies regarding human rights.

The Managing Entity is the contact point for AbTF as well as the third-party verifiers and must be able to demonstrate that everyone working with its RCS farmer base operates according to RCS requirements. This requires a functioning system for data collection, assessment, monitoring, and management.

Based on self-assessments and third-party verification results, the Managing Entity is required to design and implement the baseline and a continuous regeneration plan in order to maintain or improve its performance level regarding the criteria and indicators outlined in the RCS standard.

² https://environment.ec.europa.eu/topics/forests/deforestation/regulation-deforestation-free-products_en



3 Overview of the RCS Impact Monitoring and Assurance Process

A main element of RCS is to identify areas to stimulate and measure continuous improvements at the field and management levels. The impact monitoring and assurance system covers the production areas that are relevant to seed cotton production at the field level as well as areas between RCS-managed fields and related animal husbandry systems. It enables the Managing Entity and AbTF to track progress and to issue RCS certificates to Managing Entities.

The impact monitoring and assurance system requires the following steps to be taken:

- For impact monitoring
 - Baseline: generated or updated once every five years
 - Continuous regeneration plan: updated annually
- For the verification process
 - Self-assessment: conducted annually
 - Third-party verification for candidates and new members: conducted annually or, depending on results, every second year

Before the first verification, AbTF can support the Managing Entity with a set of guiding questions in order to establish suitable conditions for an RCS-associated farming community. To start the verification process, the Managing Entity has to start with a comprehensive self-assessment and documentation, ideally before the cotton is sown.

The documents are submitted via the RCS Assurance Platform.

In keeping with its continuous improvement approach, RCS expects the Managing Entity to stay up to date with relevant information and to develop and follow a regeneration strategy that is in line with the RCS farming communities and their priorities. To this end, RCS offers two tools to serve as a reference and follow-up framework: the **baseline** and the **continuous regeneration plan** (CRP).

3.1 The Baseline as a Reference

Once farmers' groups, target areas, and the extension cascade have been defined, the Managing Entity will compile a comprehensive **baseline** as a periodic reference for prioritisation and later improvements. The baseline is a comprehensive status-quo assessment that helps the Managing Entity to prioritise in its continuous improvement activities and to monitor their medium-term impact. The baseline is updated by the Managing Entity every five years.

The RCS baseline touches upon the following points:

- **Stakeholder assessment:** who needs to be addressed, and how, in and around the RCS-associated farming communities to make RCS successful
- **Priorities, perceptions, and expectations** of farming communities regarding their participation in RCS
- **Relevance analysis**, including the views of relevant actors within the Managing Entity and of farmers' representatives: which of the criteria addressed in RCS are critical to the Managing Entity or the farmers, what is the respective circle of influence, and what can and should have priority



- **Risk and opportunity assessment** of the most relevant and prioritised criteria (social, economic, environmental, and cultural), developing alternative scenarios of action for relevant risks that are likely to occur
- **Status quo and**, where relevant, **regeneration plans** for agricultural and natural areas and resources which will be managed by RCS-associated farmers in the future
- **Mapping of geographical areas** and field margins where RCS will be implemented
- **GPS-tagged soil assessments** and laboratory analysis results (wherever possible), representing the different geographical areas and environmental cultivation or management conditions

The above-mentioned points must be updated by the Managing Entity at least every five years. In case of significant changes - e.g. in the farmer base, growing areas, or other relevant management decisions - an update for the points affected by the change needs to be delivered to AbTF at least two weeks prior to the next third-party verification.

Guidance on the different requirements will be offered by AbTF.

3.2 The Annual Self-Assessment

It is the responsibility of the Managing Entity to demonstrate results through the annual collection of field-level and management data. RCS uses self-assessments³ as a key component of its assurance system. The Managing Entity has the duty to report and assess its performance. The self-assessment serves as a tool for the verifiers to define the most important risks regarding non-compliance with RCS requirements and to develop the verification plan.

For Managing Entities, the self-assessment serves as a reflection tool regarding the progress of implementation of the RCS standard, as it assesses and comments on its own progress.

The self-assessment must be completed at least four weeks prior to the third-party verification.

3.3 RCS Third-Party Verification

Self-assessments by the Managing Entity are verified by independent third-party verifiers every year for the first two years and, depending on verification results and potential risks, every second year thereafter. It is obligatory that the verifiers check compliance with the criteria and indicators relevant to the field level during the growing season, i.e. between sowing and harvesting.

3.4 The Continuous Regeneration Plan (CRP)

Systemic improvements require systemic thinking and planning. Based on the relevance analysis of the baseline, self-assessments, and third-party verification results, the Managing Entity is required to develop and implement a continuous regeneration plan to maintain or improve its performance with regard to the mandatory and relevant criteria and indicators outlined in the RCS standard.

For each Managing Entity joining RCS, it is obligatory to annually revisit:

- The activities and results of the past season
- The planned changes, goals, and strategies for relevant thematic areas in the coming season
- Possible needs for training of trainers and knowledge transfer to the Managing Entity's staff, training materials, learning exchanges, or project investments

The **continuous regeneration plan** (CRP) is mainly a strategic planning instrument that demonstrates that the Managing Entity has considered topics relevant to the implementation and potential upscaling of RCS.

³ For Managing Entities that possess a valid CmiA certificate, certain criteria will be carried over from the self-assessment and verification results of the CmiA verification (to avoid duplicating submissions or verifications).



The Managing Entity should report in more detail on criteria relevant to the specific context of the Managing Entity and RCS-associated farmers. The actions planned and documented in the CRP must be time-bound, locally adapted, and updated annually. The field activities plan needs to be reviewed, prioritised, and agreed with RCS farmers' representatives.

The CRP refers to the previous year (if applicable), providing a structure for planning and documenting continuous improvements while revealing goals and strategies for the following years. It is also a platform for evaluating the success of certain measures, anticipated needs, etc.

Managing Entities can use a format offered by RCS or provide their own format, as long as all relevant items are covered.

4 RCS Structure

The RCS standard is structured along principles, criteria, and indicators, which are accompanied by three enabling requirements.

4.1 The Three RCS Enabling Requirements

The enabling requirements (ER) are underlying prerequisites that need to be considered and ultimately met by a Managing Entity in order to achieve the defined principles of RCS and create the intended impact.

- A. Responsible management
- B. Community engagement
- C. Combination of traditional knowledge and science

A. Responsible Management

Responsible management concerns the Managing Entity's responsibilities. Via responsible management, a Managing Entity provides an environment that enables regenerative transformation. This includes organisational and strategic development, responsible governance and policies, fair agreements, decent and healthy working conditions, living out and communicating RCS-associated values, and providing RCS-associated farmers with knowledge and materials to start their regenerative journey. With this enabling requirement, the Managing Entity also fulfils its monitoring and reporting duties for a smooth and transparent verification process.

B. Community Engagement

RCS-associated farming communities are leading stakeholders in shaping their farming environment. Identifying important stakeholders (not only among RCS-associated farmers), following a process of free and informed consent with the communities concerned, and involving farmers in the planning and decision-making processes are all key for generating impact.

RCS-associated farming communities are actively involved in identifying challenges and opportunities for improvement through RCS at the field level, in integrating RCS principles into their farming practices, and in setting their priorities regarding what to tackle first within the current scope of action.

Peer-learning opportunities as well as the possibility of developing local start-up businesses that further the aims of RCS are additional instruments for involving and benefiting local farming communities.

C. Combination of Traditional Knowledge and Science

The concept of regenerative agriculture unites several concepts of sustainable agriculture under a scientifically sound roof. Science is important for presenting a proven concept of positive environmental impacts to cotton buyers. At the same time, many of the practices regarded as regenerative incorporate the traditional



knowledge that small-scale farmers used to cultivate crops before industrial and external-input-driven agriculture was promoted. Solutions to local challenges are specific to each location and context, and they can only be tackled by the farmers themselves. Local knowledge and experience (e.g. regarding locations, natural resources, and their uses) can complement and enrich today's scientific knowledge in the best possible way while assigning responsibility and creating ownership in RCS-associated farming communities. It is mandatory for the Managing Entity and its extension agents to learn about, honour, leverage, and multiply the available traditional knowledge resources on farming and nature in the communities.

4.2 The Ten RCS Principles

Each RCS principle connects to one or several enabling requirements.

The principles are:

1. Farm resilience is improved.
2. Farming families' livelihoods are improved.
3. Transparency and fairness in co-operation are ensured.
4. Decent working conditions are observed.
5. Soil health is restored.
6. Water resources are preserved.
7. The climate is protected.
8. The reduction and safe use of synthetic inputs are ensured.
9. Biodiversity is enhanced.
10. Animal needs are respected.

Principle 1: Farm resilience is improved.

The first RCS principle addresses the development of resilience among the associated farming communities against increasing instability in ecosystems, market conditions, and the climate. Diversification and resource efficiency play an important role, as does knowledge on how to apply regenerative farming practices.

Principle 2: Farming families' livelihoods are improved.

The second RCS principle addresses income stability, productivity, buffering the risk of monocrop harvest losses, and improved food security for small-scale farmers. Additional studies on farmers' living standards may be conducted by AbTF during the RCS pilot phase.

Principle 3: Transparency and fairness in co-operation are ensured.

Small-scale farmers are the starting point of the supply chain, yet their demands are often ignored while their voices go unheard. The third RCS principle therefore demands a fair and transparent commercial relationship between the Managing Entity and farmers. At the same time, fairness and transparency towards the standard owner and third-party verifiers are also required from the Managing Entity, with the aim of ensuring a clear division of responsibilities and a transparent flow of information in order to enable a smooth verification process.

**Principle 4: Decent working conditions are observed.**

RCS intends to ensure that relations between Managing Entities and associated farmers are based on fair principles and are in compliance with ILO core labour standards. However, small-scale farmers are self-employed, and Managing Entities have neither the power nor the right to enforce specific conditions on the farms. The fourth RCS principle address all aspects that the Managing Entity can influence by setting policies, guiding through respectful communication, raising awareness, and demonstrating non-discriminatory behaviour. If any individuals continue to disregard the requirements, the Managing Entity has the right and duty to exclude them from the programme.

Principle 5: Soil health is restored.

Soil health, meaning the functional interaction between soil texture, organic matter, plants, and soil life, is the most essential prerequisite for the long-term productivity and resilience of agricultural soils. That is why soil health is core to any definition of regenerative agriculture.

The fifth RCS principle ensures that soil conditions on RCS-associated farms are regularly assessed and that strategically planned measures are taken to improve soil conditions.

Principle 6: Water resources are preserved.

With increasingly difficult and extreme weather conditions, water becomes the most precious resource apart from soil. RCS promotes the efficient use and management of rainwater resources, including through soil moisture management. Although the preference is for RCS cotton to be a non-irrigated crop, rain-fed production is not a prerequisite for joining the RCS standard. While irrigation is permitted if cotton was already being irrigated at the time of starting with RCS, care must nevertheless be taken to use water as efficiently as possible. Where relevant, bodies of water are protected from chemical or organic sources of pollution, and the Managing Entity is encouraged to support community projects to restore eroded waterways.

Principle 7: The climate is protected.

Agriculture and the climate are closely connected. On the one hand, agriculture emits greenhouse gases; on the other hand, it is heavily affected by climate change. Regenerative practices can help to avoid greenhouse gas emissions and even remove carbon from the atmosphere. The seventh RCS principle covers criteria regarding emission reduction and avoidance as well as carbon sequestering through soils and plants. RCS criteria regarding deforestation are aligned with the EU regulation on deforestation-free products, with a cut-off date of 31 December 2020⁴.

Principle 8: The reduction and safe use of synthetic inputs are ensured.

As a crop, cotton is vulnerable to pests and diseases and requires a high level of attention over the entire season. Especially when planted in monoculture, it requires plant protection and sufficient nutrients to achieve profitable yields. Small-scale farmers have limited access to synthetic inputs, and if they do, the risk of false application is high. It is very challenging for those producers to entirely rely on botanical and natural alternatives from one season to another without long-term preparation. Soils and cultivation systems take time to adapt before reaching a new equilibrium, as do the farmers' experience, knowledge, and skills. RCS therefore strongly emphasises excluding pesticides that are hazardous for people or nature, applying allowed products safely and in a targeted manner only when needed, and working towards a replacement strategy to ensure healthy and balanced soils, thereby reducing pest and weed pressures in the medium term. The Managing Entity has to present a strategy for reducing and replacing synthetic pesticides, herbicides, and fertilisers if such products are in use when starting the regenerative journey.

⁴ <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX%3A32023R1115&qid=1687867231461>

**Principle 9: Biodiversity is enhanced.**

Biodiversity refers to the diversity of life at all levels, from genes to species to ecosystems. Up to one million species are threatened with extinction. The main driver in the decline of biodiversity is humans' use of land, but climate change is playing an increasingly important role as well. These interlinked crises must be tackled together. The ninth RCS principle addresses actions for preserving and enhancing biodiversity within the circle of influence of the Managing Entity and RCS-associated farmers.

Principle 10. Animal needs are respected.

In most cases, farm animals are part of agricultural production systems, be it as working animals or a food source. As such, RCS-associated farmers need to follow some basic rules regarding animal welfare, which will also benefit the animals' health.

The comprehensive set of criteria and indicators will be provided by AbTF shortly.