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Cotton could be used to soak up oil spills

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Richard Porter/Plainview Daily Herald Dr. Seshadri Ramkumar speaks at Texas Tech's nonwoven materials lab in Lubbock.

Posted: Thursday, May 20, 2010 1:37 pm | Updated: 1:43 pm, Thu May 20, 2010. By RICHARD PORTER Herald Agriculture Editor | 0 comments

The Texas Tech Division of Advanced Materials is on the brink of establishing another market for low-quality cotton.

According to Dr. Seshadri Ramkumar, natural absorbent qualities of cotton make it a good candidate for development of absorbent pad technology that could be used for a variety of purposes, including disasters such as the oil spill currently being battled in the Gulf of Mexico.

With that event as a backdrop, a recent news release from the university suggested that nonwoven technology being developed by researchers at Tech could be better suited for cleaning up oil spills than "booms made of synthetic material."

"Already several million feet of the oil-containment booms have been used to capture the oil spilling into the Gulf. They are made of synthetic materials, don't biodegrade and absorb only a third of what raw cotton can do," Ramkumar explained. "The properties of raw cotton allow it to soak up 40 times its weight. With chemical modifications, it can soak up to as much as 70 times its weight. And, it won't just stay in a landfill forever."

In a subsequent interview, Ramkumar said that he and his team are looking at ways to take advantage of the research that already has been done by others on cotton's absorbency to develop marketable products that take advantage of those properties.

In the process, he said, the goal is to find added value for cotton grown across the region that has received low-quality discounts. That was a particular issue over

recent years when growing conditions have led to maturity issues with the High Plains crop.

Ramkumar pointed out that in 2009, roughly 27 percent of the cotton classed at the Lubbock and Lamesa classing offices suffered from low micronaire, which is a measure of maturity. That led to a loss of approximately \$25 million for area growers.

While that cotton is not desirable for most markets, the researcher said it could be ideal for absorbent swabs.

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That is because cotton contains a natural wax that attracts oil. Because the cotton would not require dyeing or finishing - processes that make low-mic cotton undesirable for the textile industry - discounted cotton possibly would be an excellent choice for absorbent pads.

Ramkumar emphasized that he is not doing research on the absorbency of cotton, but rather the application of those properties.

From the industry standpoint, Shawn Wade with Plains Cotton Growers in Lubbock said Ramkumar's work on new markets is very much appreciated.

"It seems like its more-or-less an extension of the work he's been doing for years," Wade said of this recent endeavor.

Wade went on to agree that those markets need to be established because struggles in the growing season are a fact of life across the region.

"We're certainly appreciative of all of his efforts," Wade said. "He's thinking outside the box."

(Contact Richard Porter at 806-296-1361 or porter@plainviewdailyherald.com. Become his fan on Facebook.)

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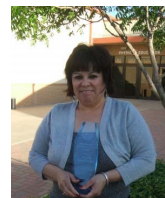
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