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## World's best cotton unique to the Caribbean

It is also the strongest and finest - with a texture like silk - making Sea Island the Blue Mountain coffee of cotton.

Commanding top dollar on the international market, Jamaica's Sea Island Cotton is undoubtedly one of the country's premium exports.

Sea Island Cotton is sold for US\$10.50 per pound on the world market, compared to the US\$2 per pound for other elite brands of cotton from around the world.

Described as a "geographic miracle" by Vitus Evans, CEO of the Jamaica Agricultural Development Foundation (JADF), demand for the Jamaican cotton constantly outstrips supply.

"It is accepted by the connoisseurs of cotton that it is the best cotton in the world, and it is utilised by the highest end of the textile industry.

"It is your exclusive brand names that use it - Prada, Gucci, etc; these are the people that use it.

"On the marketing side, every ounce of cotton we grow is exported, with most going to the Swiss, who have the technology in terms of the spinning mill that actually handles the long staple, with some going to the Japanese," Evans said.

"They have taken the same seeds and planted them in Egypt, in the United States, in India, in Israel, and they still haven't been able to produce the same quality, with all their technology.

According to Evans: "Barbados and Antigua grow a small amount and Nevis an even smaller amount, maybe 15 acres or more. We, this year, grew 220 acres, but we have gone as high as 800 acres."

The longest staple fibre in the world, with an average length of two and a half inches, Sea Island Cotton is also the strongest and finest, making it the 'Blue Mountain coffee' of cotton.

Among the reasons that make this variety unique is the fact that while others have all the bolls maturing at the same time, making them ripe for mechanical harvesting, with Sea Island, the bolls do not all mature at the same time, and so it must be harvested by hand.

Buyers also demand that this exclusive product be hand-picked, incorporating this information in their sales promotion/marketing strategy.

Harvesting by hand also eliminates the debris in the product, as happens when the mechanical harvester takes up leaves along with the cotton, adding another stage of processing to correct this and increasing cost.

The recent global economic meltdown resulted in some buyers being unable to move stock as before, and so the JADF cut back on its production, allowing for its clients to regain some level of financial stability.

"The other thing is that we want to maintain the price, and so, in that situation, we did not want to risk oversupply," Evans explained.

From Agualta Vale, St Mary, where Sea Island Cotton was first planted in a joint venture with Jamaica Producers, the JADF has since taken the project to Clarendon and St Catherine.

Given the fact that the cotton depletes soil nutrients rapidly, crop rotation is a vital component of production.

"We plant in July/August and start harvesting from January/February until May, and then you leave the land fallow for some time before planting again.

"We have moved out of St Mary for the time being because one of the things that we have found out is that it is very harsh on the soil as it sucks out a lot of nutrients," said Evans

At Brampton in Old Harbour, St Catherine, there was bales of Sea Island Cotton waiting to be packed for export, as well as bags of the cotton seed being packed for export to Barbados, where it is used in the manufacture of livestock feed.