

TOMORROW™

September 15, 2014

Can textiles save NB economy?

● Investigation finds disconnections in government, businesses and consumers

● Provincial historic skills, agricultural land, world-leading talent are all available

WHAT on EARTH are you wearing right now? And where was it made? And where are the materials from? And how much of what you paid went to the local economy?

Even if many consumers might pose the first question to their friends or family, they rarely if ever ask the latter ones.

Textiles are more than just clothing: from our wallpaper and floor coverings, bedroom and bathroom decoration, to stage and screen costumes, they include practically everything around us.

Tomorrow has investigated the state of the economy in the Canadian province of New Brunswick and what role textiles play or could play.

Could examining buying habits, agriculture and production and the assumptions made by economists lead to a textile economy? Could an area with an historic strength in crafting material and goods once again lead?

Over more than four months, *Tomorrow* interviewed dozens of farmers, businesses, artists, economists and many others from across New Brunswick and as far as Hong Kong, Scotland and Saskatchewan.

The investigation found past expertise and budding talent in the province, but significant and severe disconnects within government and between key players. And serious questions will need to be asked by the public about what future they want for the area and how their buying habits control whether that potential is used or abandoned.

History, economics, agriculture, land use and land rights, optimism, sustainability, localism, consumerism, industry and industriousness are all bound up in the subject of textiles. And the future of a province could hinge on a mix of



government action, business ingenuity and personal choice.

Alyson Brown, co-owner of Legacy Lane fibre mill in Sussex, said the province needed to grow the textile economy to have "that connection with ourselves,

what we wear and what we eat, put on ourselves and put into ourselves - if you want to get corny, interweaving of people's lives - growing something and raising something and harvesting it and transforming it".



The province produced around 350,000 yards of fabric as far back as 1871 but textiles became largely relegated to crafting for a tourism economy in the 20th century.

Today, New Brunswick's economy is struggling and analysts have warned it could face bankruptcy with others giving it failing grades.

Robert Kavcic, senior economist with the Bank of Montreal, said it was unlikely to get worse in the next two years, but acknowledged many people are turning to natural-resource powerhouses Alberta and Saskatchewan for better prospects.

He said: "At the end of the day, the choice to move out to Alberta when there obviously are jobs, or higher paying jobs, it's a personal choice."

"Clearly, if somebody's at the bottom of the pack in all these reports, it's going to make investment decisions a little more tentative in that part of the country."

"But I don't know if the reports specifically are responsible for that."

Cheap goods are everywhere, particularly when it comes to textiles, but consumers might be changing their buying habits.

The Business Development Bank of Canada reported in October 2013 that "Made in Canada" was one of five major driving forces for consumers.

It found the trend was even more pronounced in the Atlantic provinces. When asked, "Have you made a specific effort to buy a product that was made in Canada?", 45 percent of Canadians said yes. In Atlantic Canada, the figure was 57 per cent.

But to increase Canadian and even local options for textiles, it would require more agricultural production, of wool, hemp, flax or other raw materials. Small farms are being swallowed up by larger operations across the province and topsoil is disappearing as urban residential developments sprawl outwards.

The province overall is unceded Wabanaki territory whose indigenous peoples are demanding much more consultation for its use. Meanwhile, provincial planners don't even know where agricultural land is in New Brunswick to be able to protect it.

Just one of the 12 Regional Service Districts, put in charge of planning as of January 1, 2013, has mapped agricultural land and how much is currently in use. Most said they were waiting for local municipalities to provide them with details of their land use, with no deadline of when that information is needed. Others directed us to the department of agriculture, who in turn admitted they have just one statistician and rely on the federal Statistics Canada for current agriculture figures.

Only the Chaleur region could confirm that it had just 19km² of 59km² of land as active farms – 67.8 per cent, is not currently in use.

Rachel MacGillivray, an instructor at the New Brunswick College of Craft and

Design, an award-winning leading institution on textiles, said there needed to be more education and marketing about where textiles come from, from agriculture to producers, weavers and designers.

She said: "We need a really good PR campaign to get people away from buying cheap - which is actually low quality and it's not going to be good in six months time - to investing in the community. If you can see that this is supporting New Brunswick, there might be more of a drive to do that."

"Rather than trying to force crops or animals, which might not necessarily do that well, into our environment or trying to change our environment to match them, it's about figuring out what naturally works really well here, and there's a lot that does, and what are their properties and how can we market that."

“If you can see that this is supporting New Brunswick, there might be more of a drive to do that.”

Ms Brown said Legacy Lane's passion for textiles and fibre arts, and craft in general, kept the firm and its staff going.

She said: "We're our own boss and we get to decide how things go and how it happens and there a lot of great people industry and some have a similar mindset."

Throughout this investigation, even after the most blunt assessment of the current state of the province and its agriculture and textiles, its artistry and industriousness, if you ask about optimism, you get passion in response.

Anna Mathis, a recent graduate of the NBCCD, said the choice was down to consumers.

The 20-year-old said: "It does very much depend on the people, because building a business is all about giving your customers what they want and designing your products around their needs and solving their problems."

"One of the most important things that people need to realise is that we have been making our own yarn every day up until the last 200 years. It has always been part of our culture."

"I think that it's necessary to keep this as a part of our life, not just to return to it for fun, but to return to it as a reminder of everything that we've gotten through."

Reporting by Tristan Stewart-Robertson, illustrations by Jason Skinner.

Read the full investigation at Tomorrow.is And find us at [facebook.com/tomorrowis](https://www.facebook.com/tomorrowis) and @tmrw_ on Twitter.