



Allbirds says it is supplied by about 120 farms in NZ and in the past four years has bought 453 tonnes of NZ Merino wool.

# Shoes from the sheep's back

BY: KIRSTIN MILLS

Allbirds is a successful footwear company, known for using Merino wool, but it could also possibly be a cult. The evidence? Just talk to people who have bought Allbirds shoes; they will try to convert you. They rave about the comfort or the style or the ease of washing and insist you must buy some.

Cults always need a few celebrities in their number and big names from actors Ben Affleck and Leonardo Di Caprio to Google co-founder Larry Page and New Zealand Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern

have been snapped wearing them.

Even if you have not heard of the shoes, you will likely have seen people wearing them. They are quite recognisable despite not having an obvious logo on them – there's just not anything else out there like them (although some copycat designs are starting to appear, albeit without the sustainable materials).

The Allbirds story had its earliest beginnings a decade or so ago when cult leader, ex-Kiwi footballer Tim Brown (who had studied design), wondered why the footwear industry did not use wool in shoe production, when it would be good not just for comfort, but also for sustainability.

He worked for years on getting the design right. Together with American Joey Zwillinger, he launched the company in the United States in 2016. Within five years it was estimated to be valued at \$US1.4 billion with stores and staff all around the world.

An Allbirds spokesperson says the company is committed to using NZ Merino wool that is ZQ certified. Allbirds says it sources wool from about 120 farms in NZ. In the past four years, it has bought 453 tonnes of NZ Merino wool and has committed to buying about 362t over the next year alone.

I recently bought a pair after months of foot pain and as soon as I put them on, I felt relief (yes, I have joined the cult). I have friends who wear their Allbirds as slippers because they are more comfortable than any actual slippers.

Along with Merino wool, Allbirds uses recycled and plant-based materials in its shoes. Sustainability and eco-friendliness is a big focus for the company. Its goal is to have no carbon footprint.

The company measures the emissions (from raw materials, manufacturing, product use and end of life) and announced in April that it would start adding a carbon footprint label to its shoes. It also uses carbon offsets, claiming to therefore be a completely carbon neutral business.

In May, it announced a partnership with Adidas to work on creating a shoe with the lowest-ever carbon footprint. In an interview with the Business of Hype podcast in May, Brown said the aim is to make great products sustainably, rather than making sustainable products. He told podcast host Jeff Staple: "Our definition has evolved to the idea that a product can only be great if it's sustainable."

## GREAT FOR SORE FEET

Allbirds have been a godsend to me. I suffered from thin skin due to a chemotherapy drug and I had problems with blistered feet from wearing conventional shoes. I had to limit my walking. Now with my Allbirds I have no problems. I use one pair for rough walking across a muddy field or in the rain. Feet get wet but stay warm due to the wool. If they get dirty I simply dry them out and brush the dirt off. If too muddy I put

them in the washing machine on a short cycle, cold wash. What is also interesting is their online service. You order and pay online. Shoes arrive and if they are the wrong size, colour, or you just don't like them, you return them in the box provided. The sale is refunded and you start again.

People ask me what they are like to wear. I say like slippers but more socially acceptable.

NZ is not the only country that

supplies wool into ZQ Merino. A NZ Merino company spokesperson said it supplies a significant amount of wool from outside of NZ to brand partners under ZQ.

Allbirds says it is committed to using NZ Merino wool that is ZQ certified. Does this mean Allbirds only use NZ wool? The company was asked to clarify this but had not responded by the time this magazine went to print.

– Editor.