

Economic Opportunities for the Textile Industry within the
Arizona-Sonora Borderlands Region, with a hub in the City of Tucson Ward 3

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This Position Paper is an addendum to the workbook from the “Economic Development Approach for Ward 3 and the Arizona-Sonora Borderlands Region” project. It specifically explores opportunities in the textile industry.

It is preliminary and tentative and is intended to stimulate discussion about building a “textile cluster” in the Arizona-Sonora Borderlands Region with Ward 3 as the hub, as a prerequisite for future industry expansion.

As is the case for other aspects of the project, an analysis should be performed that includes financial models and projections for such items as capital investment, job creation, workforce development, tax revenue, and expected returns and benefits to the community and economy at large..

Introduction...

The textile industry embraces the entire lifecycle of fiber, yarn, fabric, and finished product creation. It reaches far beyond traditional clothing manufacture to global commercial, industrial, and military applications on a global basis. Traditional textile manufacturing focuses on functional items; fiber artists use both natural and synthetic materials to make products of an aesthetic nature.

Textile production in Arizona dates back thousands of years to ancient indigenous people who hand-wove wild plant fibers and cultivated cotton into blankets and clothing. Cotton cultivation has existed for at least 1,500 years and is one of Arizona’s five “C”s of economic activity. In the Arizona-Sonora Borderlands Region, cotton is grown in Cochise, Graham, Pima, and Pinal counties. Cotton requires water and is best grown close to rivers and irrigation systems. However, due to droughts in the Region, production has decreased in recent years.

The two main varieties are “Upland Cotton,” suitable for denim and everyday clothing, and “Pima Cotton,” famous for extra-long, soft, and high-quality fibers.

In addition to cotton, the textile industry uses other natural fibers such as flax (linen), silk, and wool, and synthetic fibers, such as nylon, polyester, and rayon.

The main components of the supply chain include farming, ginning, milling (spinning and weaving), finished product creation, and distribution to wholesalers and retailers. The industry is primarily demand-driven by consumers, businesses, and the military.

The finished product creation component offers opportunities for small boutique businesses (especially family-run), for entrepreneurs looking to build upwardly mobile businesses, especially in specific niches, and large corporations in broad markets. Large corporations can provide higher-paying jobs and benefits, expanded career opportunities, and mentoring opportunities from experienced professionals in multiple markets.

In recent years, the milling and finished product creation components have moved offshore to low-income operations, especially in South and Southeast Asia. However, due to advances in information and process control technologies using AI/robotics already in use in such countries as Vietnam, opportunities exist to bring milling and product creation back onshore at reasonable cost. However, they are in the early stage of development at the present time.

The product creation component segments into boutique business models that are more labor-intensive and large-scale models that are less labor-intensive by using AI/robotic technology. Due to potential high demand, boutique operations could grow into large-scale operations through the implementation of AI/robotics technology.

Ward 3 in the City of Tucson is ideally suited to be the hub of an onshore textile cluster taking advantage of cotton growing and ginning in the Arizona-Sonora Borderlands Region. Textile manufacturing already exists within the Ward. It is a transportation and logistics hub due to its proximity to major freeways and the railroad in the CANAMEX corridor. The Ward is relatively flat, making it suitable for factories and warehouses, in addition to retail and commercial real estate. In conjunction with the Pima Community College and the University of Arizona, innovative research and development facilities could be established with the Ward 3 for prototyping manufacturing and production concepts.

The proximity of gem dealers and jewelry manufacturers in the Ward provides an opportunity to blend textiles with jewelry products to create highly fashionable items that represent the colors and gastronomic culture of the Southwest.

The boutique model provides opportunities for family-oriented businesses, consistent with Tucson's small business culture, providing employment opportunities for traditional labor-intensive activities.

With the implementation of AI/robotics, production output could be dramatically increased within the model as the technology improves over time, and to grow into a large-scale model. Sonoran Stitch Factory, a sewn goods manufacturer, has led the way in establishing a base in Ward 3 within the proposed “Mineral Discovery District.”

Much of the textile equipment is currently manufactured in Asia and Europe. Spinoff opportunities exist from establishing the textile cluster in Ward 3, including AI/robotic research and development at Pima Community College and the University of Arizona, and equipment manufacturing in both Arizona and Sonora.

Building an AI/robotics discipline in textiles within the University of Arizona provides an opportunity to integrate several leading disciplines. These include optical sciences, engineering, robotics, and information technology disciplines as a “center of excellence for textiles” with national recognition. Partnering with the Norton School’s fashion program brings a textile cluster close to the marketplace.

Thus, the textile industry can produce a wide variety of employment opportunities for various knowledge and skill levels within research and development, equipment manufacturing, and finished product creation activities.

AI/robotics technology in textiles is in its early stages of development in South and Southeast Asia, and certainly in the United States. However, there is clearly opportunity for the Arizona-Sonora Borderlands Region and Ward 3 within it to lead the way for textile in the United States. Implementation would be best with single product lines first, leading to broad lines over time.

The Southern Arizona Textile Supply Chain...

- *Cotton...*

Cotton is grown across Cochise, Graham, Pima, and Pinal counties, along with Maricopa and Yuma counties farther to the north and west. Pinal and Graham together rank among the top United States counties in cotton and cottonseed sales (University of Arizona Cooperative Extension, 2025). Arizona is consistently among the top three United States producers of Pima cotton, the long-staple variety developed at the USDA’s Sacaton experiment station, and prized for its softness and strength (AGDAILY, 2025).

For the 2026 crop year, USDA's Prospective Plantings report estimates roughly 95,000 acres of Arizona cotton, split between about 80,000 acres of Upland and 15,000 acres of Pima (Fill Your Plate, 2026). Multigenerational farm families, such as Arizona Cotton Growers Association President Cassy England's fourth-generation operation in Pinal County, still anchor the crop locally (Fill Your Plate, 2026).

Ginning, or separating fiber from seed, is the first processing step. The industry has consolidated sharply. Whereas more than 100 gins operated statewide in the 1960s and 1970s, including 10 in Pima County alone, only a few remain active in Arizona today (CottonGins.org, 2025). Two of them sit directly in the Arizona-Sonora Borderlands Region: the River Co-op Gin in Coolidge and the Safford Valley Cotton Growers Co-op in Safford (CottonGins.org, 2025; USDA Agricultural Marketing Service, 2025).

The most significant gap in the chain is milling (spinning and weaving). Almost none of the cotton grown in Arizona is milled locally. As Arizona Cotton Growers Association executive director Jadee Rohner put it, "We don't have mills, the quantity of that infrastructure, in the United States anymore" (KJZZ, 2026). Instead, cotton is baled and exported, overwhelmingly to Asia, to be spun into yarn and woven into fabric before returning to the United States as finished textile products. Most of the manufacturing process is done almost entirely outside the state (KJZZ, 2026) (and country).

One counterexample is instructive: Red Land Cotton, a family-run business in Moulton, Alabama, grows cotton on its own farm, gins it on-site, and then sends it to partner mills in Georgia, Kansas, Maine, South Carolina, and Texas to be spun, woven, and finished into quilts, sheets, and towels. It is a vertically integrated, farm-to-shelf model built entirely through partnerships rather than by owning a mill outright (Alliance for American Manufacturing, 2021).

This same "farm-to-shelf" model could be implemented as a network of partnerships within the Arizona-Sonora Borderlands Region.

- *Textile Cluster...*

Tucson already has a working, growing example of a textile manufacturing business and is ideal for the establishment of a textile cluster.

Sonoran Stitch Factory is a cut-and-sew manufacturer that has worked with about 30 clients and sewn over 160,000 products. It also aids partners with warehousing, fulfillment, and shipping, and is the production home for three Tucson-founded brands:

Bralessly, Postcraft Products, and Palmfree Sunwear. It also partners with other Tucson apparel and textile businesses.

Sonoran Stitch Factory also runs a registered Arizona apprenticeship program, which was a former state-funded workforce accelerator that trained roughly 250 industrial sewists between 2022 and 2025. Additionally, there have been several Pima Community College and University of Arizona internship opportunities, and partnerships with the University of Arizona's Sonoran Center for Excellence in Disabilities and local refugee resettlement agencies.

- *Logistics and Distribution...*

Southern Arizona's transportation assets tie the supply chain together. The Union Pacific Railroad and Interstate 10 pass through Ward 3 and sit close to Interstate 19. Hence, textile factories and warehouses have efficient routes for inbound raw materials and outbound finished goods across the nation and to and from Mexico.

Two Paths to a Textile Industry: Labor-Based and Robotics-Based...

Sonoran Stitch Factory proves that labor-based, small-batch manufacturing already works in Tucson. In addition, a second larger opportunity is opening globally: AI/robotics-based textile manufacturing. In Vietnam, garment manufacturers are turning to automation to meet global buyers' demand for shorter lead times and more transparency, reshaping how products are designed, produced, and delivered (Vietnam Today, 2025). Vietnamese factories now operate AI/robotic textile lines with significantly fewer employees than traditional methods require.

Other manufacturers in the United States are following suit, including Atlanta-based SoftWear Automation's patented Sewbot platform. The platform uses machine vision and lightweight robotics to guide fabric through a sew head with the real-time adjustments of a human operator. It has attracted more than \$44 million in funding, including a \$20 million round in 2025 led by the sustainability fund of Danish fashion group Bestseller A/S (PR Newswire, 2025; SoftWear Automation, Inc.).

Seattle-based Sewbo takes a different approach, temporarily stiffening fabric with a water-soluble polymer so that standard industrial robots can handle it through cutting and stitching. This technology drew Levi Strauss & Co into a joint pilot with Siemens and the Department of Defense, funded by the Advanced Robotics for Manufacturing Institute (Sourcing Journal, 2026).

This project is an example of “Bot Couture” - robotic clothing manufacturing initiatives, futuristic fashion intersections, and automated apparel production projects.

The largest and most directly relevant company is German: Munich-based “sewts GmbH.” This company combines artificial intelligence, robotics, and material simulation to let robots handle limp, deformable textiles (The Robot Report, 2023). Its “sewts.VELUM” system uses FANUC robot arms and 3D cameras to identify seams, corners, and fabric type in real time and feed the material into finishing equipment (FANUC Europe, 2024). FANUC is a Japanese-based company with operations in Europe and the United States.

Germany is also home to KUKA SE & Co KGaA, whose KR AGILUS and KR SCARA robot arms are widely used to pick and place pre-cut fabric layers in robotic sewing cells (Texpertise Network, 2025; KUKA Global, 2024).

Robotics changes the economics of manufacturing in a way that favors communities such as Ward 3. Given Tucson’s existing small-business culture, a family could realistically operate an AI/robotic textile factory with only a handful of employees, combining the ownership and craftsmanship of a business such as Sonoran Stitch Factory with the throughput of a robotics-enabled line. That is a meaningfully different opportunity than either a traditional garment factory or a fully automated plant: it is a vocational, family-scale business that AI/robotics makes newly viable from single to broad product lines.

What does a state-supported fashion ecosystem look like elsewhere in Arizona?

FABRIC, a nonprofit fashion incubator in Tempe, provides design, sourcing, and small-batch manufacturing support to apparel entrepreneurs, with a stated goal of establishing Arizona as a national fashion manufacturing hub (Fabric Incubator).

Tucson has no equivalent today but has potential. An AI/robotics-enabled textile innovation cluster could give Tucson its own version of that ecosystem, one built around advanced manufacturing.

The Full Range of Opportunity: Six Markets for Textiles...

A comprehensive list of both hypothetical and actual products provided by Sonoran Stitch Factory founder Erica Yngve that have been made or that a factory at such scale would be equipped to make, across markets adding up to a substantial regional industry, includes:

- *Advanced Manufacturing and Technical Textiles...*

This is the broadest category, and the one where Sonoran Stitch Factory already has direct experience: covers for telescopes and other precision machines, optics equipment, and clean rooms; transport bags; thermally insulated covers and layers for space or deep-sea equipment; fire-resistant materials for high-heat machinery; sound-dampening wraps and blankets for rooms, spacecraft, or heavy equipment; machine-guarding curtains; soft robotic components; utility tool-roll bags and organizers; lifting slings for equipment, sensitive items, or animals; insulated pipe covers and jackets; and filtration devices.

The University of Arizona operates some of the world's leading astronomy and optics programs, including Steward Observatory and the Wyant College of Optical Sciences' own optical fabrication facilities. A local manufacturer already producing telescope-related soft goods, minutes from a university with an internationally leading optics and astronomy program, is a direct, ready-made research and procurement relationship.

- *Aerospace and Defense...*

In this area, products include aircraft seat covers; cargo net systems; tie-down straps and webbing; aircraft interior soft goods; pouches and bags for parts maintenance, headsets, survival kits, and flight documentation; medical gear; weapons-transport systems such as tactical vests and pouches; maintenance aprons; covers for weapons, tanks, and ground equipment; thermal shielding blankets; uniforms; and sun-, wet-, hot-, and dry-weather gear, including armored compression shirts. Davis-Monthan Air Force Base gives Tucson a direct, local connection to this market.

- *Healthcare...*

On the patient side: walker bags, wheelchair accessories, IV pole organizers, slings, bed and mattress linens, shower curtains, and window treatments. On the hospital side: medical equipment covers, sterilization wraps, linen and laundry cart bags, instrument cases, therapy straps and exercise bands, hospital and post-surgical gowns, adaptive clothing, prosthetic liners and soft braces, and compression garments. Sonoran Stitch Factory already produces shower curtains commercially, so this is an active capability, not a hypothetical one. The University of Arizona's biomedical engineering and health sciences programs, alongside Tucson's hospital systems, are natural partners for the more clinical items on this list, such as adaptive clothing and prosthetic liners.

- *Outdoor Recreation*

Bags, tents, tarps, backpacks and hydration systems, gaiters, sun-protective apparel, sacks, chairs, seat cushions, awnings, and saddle bags fall into this category. Sonoran Stitch Factory already makes gaiters and sun-protective gear with Palm Free Sunwear, again demonstrating the viability and potential of this market.

- *Apparel...*

Denim, knits, swimwear, lingerie, outdoor gear, wovens, workwear, suiting, shoes, bags, scarves, belts, and children's and infant clothing and accessories are few in a vast array of products that can be produced. Apparel is also the most varied market of the six: "each type needs its own separate manufacturing due to machine needs" (Erica Yngve, Sonoran Stitch Factory founder, September 2026), so a denim line and a swimwear line are, in practice, two different production setups. That variety is also an opportunity. It means apparel manufacturing in Tucson could grow in many directions from single product types to multiple on a consistent basis.

- *Fashion and Jewelry Accessories...*

Tucson's Gem, Fossil, and Mineral Showcase gives the region a natural connection between apparel and accessories: locally cut stone and gem pieces used as clothing trim, buttons, and jewelry pairings, rather than imported hardware.

The Missing Piece: A University of Arizona Program...

The University of Arizona already has strong infrastructure to build a textile robotics program on. The College of Engineering offers a Master of Engineering in Robotics and Automation, along with undergraduate mechanical engineering and electrical and computer engineering programs with active robotics research and student teams (University of Arizona College of Engineering). None of it, however, is organized around textiles specifically. There is no University of Arizona laboratory, concentration, or degree track focused on fabric handling, robotic sewing, or apparel automation yet.

The University of Arizona has a second, less obvious asset that is unusually well matched to this technology: the Wyant College of Optical Sciences, one of the largest and most respected optics and photonics programs in the world, with research spanning optical engineering, image science, and machine vision.

Every robotic textile system described herein depends on the same core capability: a camera and vision system that can read a moving, wrinkling piece of fabric in real time and tell a robot exactly where to grip and sew it (The Robot Report, 2023; FANUC Europe, 2024). That paves the way for partnership with the optics and photonics program. A partnership that pairs the University of Arizona optical sciences with University of Arizona robotics would position Tucson not just to operate robotic textile equipment, but to help design and manufacture the vision systems inside it. Effectively that opportunity turns Ward 3's optics and photonics industry strength into a textile-specific advantage.

In August 2026, the U.S. Department of War announced FutureTEX, a ten-year, \$480 million university-led project to rebuild domestic production of advanced fibers and textiles for military use, with \$36 million committed in year one; the project is led by North Carolina State University, with Georgia Tech, Drexel University, the University of Massachusetts Lowell, and the nonprofit Industrial Sewing and Center as founding partners (Ecotextile News, 2026). Assistant Secretary of Defense Joseph Jewell said the initiative exists because "textiles play a crucial role in warfighters' lives" and the country needs "the capability to manufacture those products in the United States." after decades of offshoring (Ecotextile News, 2026). No Arizona university is currently part of that consortium. Tucson's Davis-Monthan Air Force Base gives the region a direct, local connection to military demand for textiles. This provides a strong argument for the University of Arizona to pursue a role in this initiative.

STEAM (Science, Technology, Engineering, Arts, and Mathematics): Where Left-Brained and Right-Brained Industries Meet...

The Ward 3 economic development plan groups the region's target industries into what can usefully be called left-brained, (aerospace, defense, and high-tech fields built on engineering and analytical rigor), and right-brained, (the creative and artistic fields, including fashion, which is a natural extension of textiles). A robotics-based textile industry sits directly at the intersection of the two, and is a genuine STEAM opportunity: science and engineering in robotics and materials, technology in the AI and machine vision, and art in the designing and creation of the finished products.

Framing the opportunity this way is also a workforce strategy. It gives Tucson a reason to develop higher-paying technical jobs (the robotics, optics, and controls engineering roles) alongside creative and vocational ones (the sewing, pattern-making, and design roles).

The right-brained side already has real local hooks to build on. Tucson is a UNESCO Creative City of Gastronomy, and a textile cluster could extend that identity into apparel such as locally produced clothing lines built around Tucson food and culinary themes.

Tucson's long-running Gem, Fossil, and Mineral Showcase creates an obvious connection between jewelry and lapidary work and clothing accessories, letting a Tucson textile brand accessorize garments with locally cut stone and gem pieces.

Local Tucson artists could be commissioned to design apparel concepts and prints, giving working designers a production partner they do not currently have in the city.

An existing local business, Hem and Her Bridal, already shows there is a market and a manufacturing relationship for Tucson-based apparel today, which is a glimpse into a broader fashion industry that could grow in Tucson.

The “Economic Development Approach for Ward 3 and the Arizona-Sonora Borderlands Region” project envisions locating a robotics-enabled textile cluster within a proposed Mineral Discovery District close to Oracle Road, building on the corridor's existing identity as Tucson's Mineral and Fossil District, home to shows such as the RMGM Gem, Fossil, and Mineral Showcase and several other gem and mineral events held there annually (Xpo Press). The goal is not just to place an cluster there, but to make the district itself trendy and fashionable, especially for tourism. Pairing the gem and mineral identity the corridor already has with a new textile and design identity would allow jewelry, textiles, and fashion to reinforce one another in the same place.

The Vision: A Family-Owned, Robotics-Enabled Factory in Ward 3...

Put together, the opportunity is specific: a family-owned, AI/robotics-enabled textile factory, sited within the proposed Mineral Discovery District close to Oracle Road, employing a small crew of vocational workers trained through a pipeline modeled on Sonoran Stitch Factory's existing apprenticeship program. AI/robotics does repetitive, high-volume work; people run the business, handle custom and small-batch orders, and do the design and finishing work machines cannot. That combination, ownership at family scale, but throughput at industrial scale, is what makes this different from both a traditional garment shop and an automated factory, and it is the opportunity a University of Arizona AI/robotics-and-optics partnership would exist to serve. Over time, a reliable local manufacturing base is also what would let an actual Tucson fashion industry develop.

Recommendations...

- Convene University of Arizona's College of Engineering, the Wyant College of Optical Sciences, Norton School of Ecology, Sonoran Stitch Factory, and Friends of Ward 3 to scope a textile robotics research and workforce initiative, potentially housed within the existing Robotics and Automation program.
- Pursue a connection to FutureTEX and Department of Defense textile-manufacturing funding, using Davis-Monthan Air Force Base's local presence as the region's point of entry.
- Designate the Mineral Discovery District close to Oracle Road as the target site for a robotics-enabled textile cluster, and pursue district branding that pairs its gem and mineral identity with a new fashion and textile identity.
- Explore a farm-to-mill partnership model, similar to Red Land Cotton's, that connects Cochise, Pima, and Pinal County cotton growers and the Coolidge and Safford gins to out-of-state or future in-state milling partners.
- Cultivate the creative-economy side of the industry deliberately, commissioning local artists for apparel concepts, developing Tucson gastronomy- and gem-themed clothing lines, and supporting existing businesses such as Hem and Her Bridal, so that manufacturing capacity and creative demand grow together.

Conclusion...

The opportunities are abundant in the Arizona-Sonora Borderlands region in this next phase of textile manufacturing: automated, small-batch, close to the raw material, and close to the customer. The Sonoran Stitch Factory has already proven the labor-based version of that model. AI/robotics, already deployed by companies from Atlanta to Munich, and already reshaping factories in Vietnam, is what would let a family-owned Tucson operation scale without losing its small-business character. Paired with the University of Arizona's existing strength in robotics and optics, a Federal government newly willing to fund domestic textile manufacturing, and a creative community ready to design for it, the region has almost everything it needs to build this industry.

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