

## States and Localities Aim to Stem Tide of Fast Fashion Textile Waste

Last year, Massachusetts became the first state to enact a textiles disposal ban that covers clothing, as well as items such as carpets and towels, all of which must be donated or recycled rather than thrown in the trash. The only exceptions are for contaminated textiles, such as those with mold or insects.

More recently, a California bill would require producers to implement and fund an extended producer responsibility program for recycling and reuse of clothing and other unwanted textiles. The bill gained traction in the most recent legislative session and is expected to be reintroduced in 2024.

Local governments are also in the game. According to a PromoLeaf study of the three largest cities in each state, only eight provide curbside textile collection as part of their recycling programs, but over 75 percent supported some type of initiative aimed at reducing cloth waste.

State and local measures to stem the tide of textile waste serve to advance overarching sustainability goals such as reducing greenhouse gas emissions and conserving natural resources. They also can reduce the volume of municipal solid waste in the face of population growth and tapped out land-fills.

It is no surprise that attention is turning to textiles. The Environmental Protection Agency estimates that textiles accounted for 17 million tons, or 5.8 percent, of all municipal solid waste generated in 2018—clothing and footwear constituted the largest component. The textile recycling rate was only 14.7 percent.

According to the Council for Textile Recycling, the average U.S. citizen tosses 70 pounds of textiles per year, a 55 percent increase since 2000. This increase is commonly attributed to the

“fast fashion” industry. As McKinsey explains, compressed production cycles and low prices allow consumers to frequently augment their wardrobes. As a result, the number of garments purchased per person increased 60 percent between 2000 and 2014, and “across nearly every apparel category, consumers keep clothing items about half as long as they did 15 years ago.”

Levi Strauss’s publicly released life cycle analysis of its signature 501 jeans reveals the environmental impacts. The carbon emissions associated with one pair of jeans equates to 69 miles driven by the average American car; the water usage alone equates to one household’s total water needs for three days.

On the upside, Massachusetts contends that in its state 85 percent of textiles currently sent to land-fills could be donated, reused, or recycled—estimating that 45 percent is usable clothing, 20 percent is fiber conversion grade, and 30 percent is wiping cloth grade. For example, a stained tee shirt may have a “second life” as a wiping cloth while a sock can be used for pillow stuffing.

The success of textile landfill diversion efforts, however, largely depends on viable donation, re-use, and recycling alternatives. Massachusetts emphasizes the central role of its “extensive collection infrastructure of both non-profit and for-profit textile recovery organizations” and provides a drop-off location directory searchable by material type. It also lists manufacturer and retailer take-back programs that accept items for recycling, including, in some cases, products they don’t even sell.

In addition, the rapidly growing market for second-hand (or “new to me”) clothing is providing a disposal alternative. Dedicated platforms such as Poshmark, in addition to established retailers such as Lululemon,



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are participating in this form of “re-commerce.” Statista predicts the global market value of resale apparel will almost double from 2022 to 2027—fueled in part by Generation Z and Millennials opting for less expensive, more environmentally sound clothing purchases.

The recycling market is also developing—but it’s a work in progress. The Textile Exchange explains that textile-to-textile recycling has considerable potential but “on the ground the processes needed to make it happen are extremely complex.” It cites, for example, the challenges associated with collection and sorting infrastructure. Other challenges include fostering technologies that achieve clean material feeds—no easy feat given the amount of clothing composed of blended fibers—and addressing the energy use and pollution from recycling processes.

Taking note of recent state developments, the American Circular Textiles Group recently urged EPA to consider federal legislation on extended producer responsibility that would “harmonize state laws with clear textile collection targets and carve out funds for textile reuse and recycling logistics, infrastructure, and innovation” as part of its national strategy on plastics pollution—including microfiber pollution from polyester and the other plastics that make up 60 percent of the materials used in clothing production.

The federal government may eventually regulate textile waste—but for now states are leading the way.

**Reuse and recycling options are expanding, led by governments and clothing firms**