

California wildfires

'Overwhelming': what happens to 50,000lb of extra LA wildfire clothing donations?

Businesses like Suay Sew Shop are trying to salvage piles of damaged textiles - and warn of the dangers of climate impact and overconsumption



📷 People sort through donated clothing and other items at a pop-up donation center for wildfire victims in Arcadia, California, on 11 January. Photograph: Clutch Pockets Wambli/ZUMA Press Wire/REX/Shutterstock

Victoria Namkung in Los Angeles

Tue 28 Jan 2025 07:00 EST

At [Suay Sew Shop](#) in Los Angeles's arts district, mounds of clothes are piled high in a warehouse. The T-shirts, socks, jackets and denim are surplus donations from the LA wildfires that community groups across the city were unable to distribute because they had too much already, or because the items were dirty, damaged or poorly made.

Instead of letting the clothes go to a landfill, where they can cause a host of environmental problems, Suay has rescued 50,000lb of textiles so they can be cleaned, sorted and upcycled by professional designers and seamstresses/seamsters. Since LA currently has no permanent textile recycling or collection, it's up to groups like Suay to save as many textiles as possible before they get dumped or exported.



📷 Textile donations utilized by Suay Sew Shop.
Photograph: Courtesy Suay Sew Shop

“To see the overwhelming influx of textiles donations here in [Los Angeles](#) in response to the devastating wildfires just shows how the current systems in place have failed us all,” said Suay’s co-founder and CEO Lindsay Rose Medoff. “We have to draw the connections to our everyday consumption and disposal habits. Until we draw these connections, the same overproduction that is impacting our climate and resulting in these disasters will continue to strengthen.”

Experts say a surge in donations can actually impede relief efforts since volunteers have to handle sudden influxes of clothing when they are unwearable or unwanted. Without a

climate-informed approach, well-intentioned donations are likely to end up in landfills or polluting [deserts](#) and [beaches](#) in other parts of the world. A leading industrial polluter, the fashion industry is responsible for about [10%](#) of global carbon emissions, and the rise of “fast fashion”, cheap garments that are only worn a few times, is a major [contributor](#) to our environmental crisis.

Suay expects to take on additional donations in the coming weeks as other centers in the Los Angeles area continue shutting down, and say they will find a way to upcycle them into the fire aid relief support they were meant for. Suay was among the first to mobilize, creating a [free store](#) for LA fire victims that features stylish clothing and textiles that allow people to replace lost items with dignity. It’s open daily and located upstairs from their retail shop, which sells Suay’s upcycled fashion and home goods, from mini mesh

tote bags made from old sports jerseys to oven mitts remade from flannel and denim, and one-of-a-kind dresses fashioned from vintage T-shirts.

They are asking people to support fire victims by [sponsoring](#) a \$20 Suay It Forward bag of clothes to be sorted, donated and upcycled into free materials for fire victims and other members of the community in need.

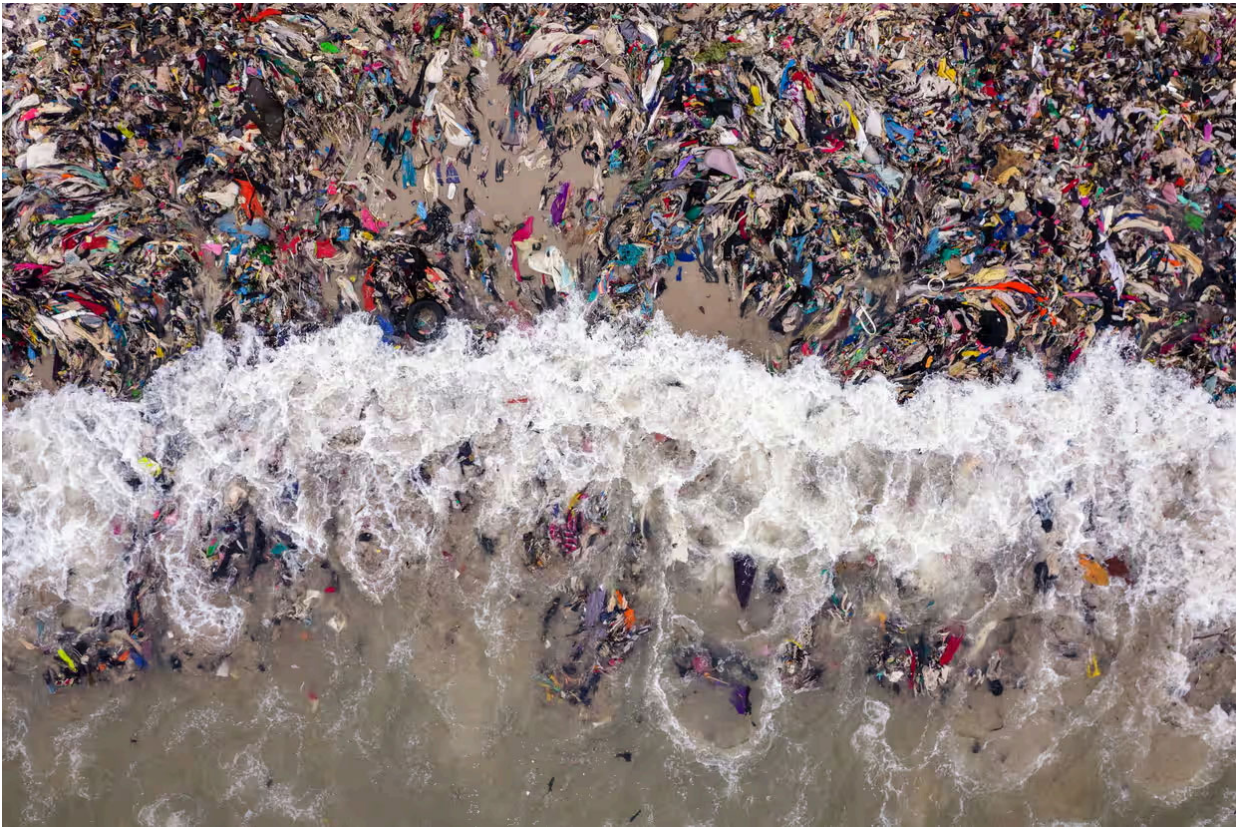
Allow Instagram content?

This article includes content provided by Instagram. We ask for your permission before anything is loaded, as they may be using cookies and other technologies. To view this content, **click 'Allow and continue'**.

[Allow and continue](#)

Since 2017, Suay has taken in enormous volumes of clothing and upcycled unused textiles into remade apparel and home goods, diverting more than 4m lbs of textiles from landfills in the process. Their “zero-landfill, zero-export system” means excess donations are handled responsibly.

“One of the biggest impacts stemming from excess donations is the reappearance of these textiles in developing countries,” said [Jessica Kosak](#), who teaches courses on sustainable systems in fashion at ASU FIDM. “They don’t necessarily have the waste infrastructure we have here in the US, and they can’t effectively dispose of these materials, so the result is things end up in waterways, on beaches and in our oceans and that contributes to pollution overall.”



📷 Discarded secondhand clothes cover the beach in the coastal fishing community of Jamestown in Accra, Ghana, on 25 July 2022. Photograph: Muntaka Chasant/Rex/Shutterstock

A disturbing **85%** of all textiles end up in landfills where they emit methane gas and leach chemicals and dyes into our soil and groundwater. Only about 15% of clothing and other textiles gets reused, even though an estimated 95% of the materials such as fabrics, yarns, fibers and buttons are recyclable. In 2021, approximately **1.2m tonnes** of textiles were thrown out in California alone. Last year, the state passed a first-in-the-country **textile recycling bill** that puts the onus on brands to implement and fund a statewide reuse, repair and recycling program for their products, but it won't be operational until 2028.

“I think disasters like these bring out the best and the worst of our systems, which are really not designed for this volume of any particular product,” said **Dr Joanne Brasch**, director of advocacy for the non-profit California Product Stewardship Council (CPSC), who co-sponsored the state's Responsible Textile Recovery Act.



📷 People look through donated clothes in Altadena, California, on 19 January. Photograph: Katie McTiernan/Anadolu via Getty Images

But there are things the state can do, sustainability advocates say: host clothing swap opportunities and provide public workshops on how to properly clean and mend clothes so people can learn about maintaining the value of our apparel.

Rather than donating more clothes for fire victims, experts say to consider selling wearable pieces on platforms such as Depop, Poshmark, ThredUp or eBay and give the proceeds to fire victims. Peer-to-peer reselling apps help ensure the item retains its value because a seller is more likely to clean the piece or make any needed repairs and give it the best chance possible to be resold.

“You’re attaching value even if you’re selling a fast fashion item for \$10,” said ASU FIDM’s Kosak. “When someone purchases something off one of those platforms, they’re going to value it more because they had to go searching for it.” Not everyone has time to sell clothing via an app or digital platform, but taking that mindset of cleaning and repairing any items and treating textiles in a way that you want to receive them goes a long way in ensuring our clothes can go on.

Most of the people who donated apparel for fire victims probably did so with good intentions for their clothing to be reused, while others use disaster as a

chance to offload items they didn't want any more.

But Suay, which has built a digital community of more than 500,000 people on Instagram, and other like-minded activists, are helping more people wake up to the serious impacts of overproduction, overconsumption and lack of infrastructure to handle textile waste responsibly.

“This is a pivotal moment in understanding the volume, our broken waste management for this product and understanding that no one wants a lot of the stuff in your closet,” said CPSC’s Brasch. “One of the easier things individuals can do is to relieve the burden of someone else having to do it.”

Why you can rely on the Guardian not to bow to Trump - or anyone

I hope you appreciated this article. Before you move on, I wanted to ask whether you could support the Guardian’s journalism as we begin to cover the second Trump administration.

As Trump himself observed: “The first term, everybody was fighting me. In this term, everybody wants to be my friend.”

He’s not entirely wrong. All around us, media organizations have begun to capitulate. First, two news outlets pulled election endorsements at the behest of their billionaire owners. Next, prominent reporters bent the knee at Mar-a-Lago. And then a major network - ABC News - rolled over in response to Trump’s legal challenges and agreed to a \$16m million settlement in his favor.

The Guardian is clear: we have no interest in being Donald Trump’s - or any politician’s - friend. Our allegiance as independent journalists is not to those in power but to the public. Whatever happens in the coming months and years, you can rely on the Guardian never to bow down to power, nor back down from truth.

How are we able to stand firm in the face of intimidation and threats? As journalists say: follow the money. The Guardian has neither a self-interested billionaire owner nor profit-seeking corporate henchmen pressuring us to appease the rich and powerful. We are funded by our readers and owned by the Scott Trust - whose only financial obligation is to preserve our journalistic mission in perpetuity.

What’s more, we make our fearless, fiercely independent journalism free to all, with no paywall - so that everyone in the US can have access to responsible, fact-based news.

With the new administration boasting about its desire to punish journalists, and Trump and his allies already pursuing lawsuits against newspapers whose stories they don’t like, it has never been more urgent, or more perilous, to pursue fair, accurate reporting. Can you support the Guardian today?