

California Could Make Apparel Producers Liable for Textile Waste

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Reducing textile waste is the focus of California's SB 707. *Wokephoto17 / Getty Images*

The Golden State could become the first in the nation to require textile recycling after a California lawmaker introduced legislation to create a statewide collection and recycling program for discarded garments and fabrics.

SB 707 would require producers of clothing and textiles to fund the creation of an extended producer responsibility (EPR) program. State Senator Josh Newman, who represents the 29th district including parts of Los Angeles, San Bernadino and Orange County, introduced the bill aimed at increasing textile recycling and reuse.

“Though many people don’t realize it, the clothing and fashion industry currently accounts for fully 10 percent of the world’s carbon dioxide output,” Newman added. “The rise of ‘fast fashion,’ which revolves around the marketing and sale of low-cost, low-quality garments which tend to go out of style with increasing speed, threatens to have a long-lasting and devastating impact on our planet.”

The average consumer in the U.S. trashes over 81 pounds of clothing each year—an increase of 55 percent per capita since the year 2000, Newman said in a statement last week. While most materials found in textile goods are recyclable or reusable if properly sorted and processed, America recycles just 15 percent of post-consumer apparel and textile items like bedding, towels, shower curtains, furniture upholstery and tablecloths.

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“By employing an EPR approach, SB 707 will enroll industry participants as partners and stewards to create an end-to-end framework that will reduce textile waste in California while supporting a second-hand clothing market that can continue to thrive,” Newman said.

Thrift stores and other clothing collectors that serve as secondary markets for apparel and textiles will be used as collection sites under the program. Goodwill and similar outfits will become part of an integrated system for sortation, divvying up products for sale and recycling.



“For more than 100 years, Goodwill has been a pioneer of sustainable fashion through the collection of secondhand goods, resale and recycling efforts,” Nicole Suydam, president and CEO of Goodwill of Orange County and chair of the California Council of Goodwills, said. “My Goodwill colleagues across California and I look forward to working in partnership with Senator Newman and the California Product Stewardship Council to accelerate this important work and ensure a more sustainable future for all.”

California already leads the nation in implementing recycling models and EPR programs that address end-of-life concerns for products like paint, carpet, mattresses, pharmaceuticals, mercury thermostats and pesticide containers. These programs make producers liable for a post-consumer product’s environmental impact.

“Textiles have been identified as a top material, and the fastest growing category, in residential and commercial waste streams in California,” said Doug Kobold, SB 707 sponsor and executive director of the California Product Stewardship Council. “Local governments face costly challenges expanding textile collection and sorting since the materials can absorb, tangle, and combust if mixed into plastic recycling systems.”

The current system which forces the “cost burden for managing unusable textiles” onto thrift stores, collectors, and secondhand markets is unsustainable, he continued. “Producers keep making products with no plan for what to do with them when they are no longer wearable,” Kobold said.

“California continues to lead by holding producers accountable for planning and funding an ongoing repair and recycling program for managing unusable textiles and apparel,” he said.

State-level action continues taking aim at mitigating textile waste. Massachusetts recently moved to keep mattresses and home textiles out of landfills, while New York joined California is requiring used carpet collection and recycling. The issue of clothing waste recently made it onto primetime airwaves when “Shark Tank” featured a textile recycling startup that ultimately got \$300,000 out of investor Mark Cuban.