California advances bill to hold fashion accountable for its waste

If passed, the legislation would expand reuse, repair and recycling, and require companies to foot the bill. It would be a watershed moment for fashion’s supply chain, but experts wonder if it goes far enough.

BY RACHEL CERMANAEKY
July 4, 2024

This article is part of our Vogue Business membership package. To enjoy unlimited access to our weekly Sustainability Edit, which contains Member-only reporting and analysis, sign up for membership here.

California legislators have advanced a landmark bill that tries to address fashion’s sprawling waste problem.
through increased reuse, repair and recycling — and requiring producers to pay for these services to be scaled.

The Responsible Textile Recovery Act of 2024 (SB-707), which proposes an extended producer responsibility (EPR) framework for clothing and textiles, passed the California Assembly Natural Resources Committee on Tuesday with a nine-versus-three vote. The next step will be the appropriations committee, which allocates funding and will determine fiscal cost of the bill, and it can then move to the assembly floor.

EPR, which aims to hold companies responsible for the impacts of the products they make, is agreed to be a necessary strategy for managing waste streams in fashion and beyond. SB-707 would require producers that sell or distribute in or into California to implement and fund a programme, overseen by the state’s recycling agency, CalRecycle, that will incentivise the reuse, repair and recycling of garment and textile fibres.

It is a pioneering bill that the state hopes will set a precedent for others to follow, given the fashion industry’s rapid growth and its largely unaddressed waste stream globally.

"California’s share of waste from textiles keeps going up. It’s the single fastest-growing component in our landfills, and that’s ironic because 90-something per cent of textiles are recyclable, there just isn’t a system in place to affect that process,” says State Senator Josh Newman, who introduced the bill. “This bill is very deliberate in trying to create a circular economy around textiles — where if you buy a pair of socks, a couple pennies of the cost of that sock are going to be earmarked for this process.”

In addition to establishing recycling infrastructure for textiles, which is virtually non-existent today, the bill would support state efforts to encourage the repair and reuse of clothing and textiles, strengthen the ability of thrift stores and charities to handle unsellable garments, and combat textile waste by incentivising the use of more sustainable, easier-to-recycle and recycled materials. Importantly, resale is defined as selling to a
What’s missing

Some are concerned, though, that the bill risks overlooking some of the equity aspects of fashion’s waste problem, if there isn’t enough oversight or accountability during the implementation phase.

“There is a great deal in this bill that we are excited about. We are eager to see implementation of a textile recovery and processing programme that [gives preference to] repair and reuse, and glad for the priority given to processing facilities closer to the point of collection to improve accountability and reduce associated emissions,” says Heather Podoll, advocacy coordinator at California non-profit Fibershed.

Provisions to increase data collection as well as to improve product design, including on compostability and microplastic releases, are other pioneering and much-welcomed components of the bill, she says.

“However, the devil is in the details, and most of those will be set up in the implementation phase — with much of the responsibility given to the producer organisation to develop. The producers themselves have less incentive to take on costs and change their practices than other stakeholders who are carrying the burden of the current system’s harms,” she adds.

Those harms include water pollution from factories during manufacturing, for example, and communities in the Global South receiving more clothes than they have capacity to wear or infrastructure to manage properly.

Fibershed, along with The Or Foundation, both submitted letters to the legislature stating their support for the bill — if it is amended significantly. They worry about the makeup of the organisation that will be created in order to implement the requirements of the bill (known as a producer responsibility organisation, or
Brands and manufacturers are required to participate; Fibershed and The Or Foundation want to ensure other voices are included, such as those from communities worried about health issues from chemicals used in apparel manufacturing or those impacted by fashion’s waste stream.

Newman believes the oversight process for the PRO will be rigorous enough to address these concerns.

Questions have also been raised about how certain provisions of the bill are written. SB-707 calls for materials to be tracked through their final destination, beyond the point of sale, or even resale, and all the way to wherever they end up when no one has a use for them. In many cases in the US and Europe, that has often been in landfill or an incinerator; in the Global South (where many of Europeans’ and Americans’ old clothes end up), it becomes waste in the desert, on beaches or along river banks.

The ability to track materials all the way to those points would be major for an industry that has done little to examine where its products go beyond the initial consumer — and was one of the key points of contention from industry voices during the creation of the bill. The Or Foundation says, however, that tracking alone doesn’t equate to change on the ground. The organisation called for the authors of the bill to amend it to require not just tracking materials, but also to ensure that once they reach that final destination, they are handled according to the same standards that the bill intends to establish for municipalities closer to home.

“What we’re trying to do is create a system that over time would minimise the amount of textiles that aren’t recycled,” says Senator Newman, in response to these calls. He’s clear that by recyclable, he means through the use of textile-to-textile recycling — not reuse or downcycling. “We’ve all seen those photographs of the giant piles in the Atacama Desert in Chile, and that’s the result, really, of the absence of a workable circular economy.”
Waiting for clarity

The language in the bill is intentionally non-specific. Because it creates a process that has no precedent in the US, there are a lot of unknowns that will only be identified or addressed as they arise. By wording certain requirements in broad terms — and with the ability to continue to amend the bill as it navigates the legislative process before passage — proponents of the bill say CalRecycle and other stakeholders will have the flexibility to explore and refine the process in real time.

While the bill has now passed out of committee, there is still plenty of time to amend it further, which Fibershed and The Or Foundation hope will happen. The governance structure for the PRO board of directors is a top priority for what they want to see amended, along with a provision to establish standards for where materials end up (as opposed to just tracking them there) and more explicit links to environmental and public health impact data.

“The problem with textile waste is not only one of material volumes, but it is also the impact of those materials on both environmental and human/public health in the course of their management (or lack thereof),” Fibershed said in its letter, which called for the bill to require specific language around mitigating these harms. They worry that if the PRO is not specifically mandated to address these concerns, it will not do so. From the bill’s authors’ perspective, this is another point where the language had to be non-specific, in order for the PRO to find the most effective ways to address it, with the authority and oversight from CalRecycle offering a mechanism for accountability.

Podoll says the bill will still be a big step forward even without the amendments — it will provide necessary funding for the handling of textile materials across their life cycle — but it won’t create the holistic impact that many had hoped it would. “The status quo of fast fashion’s volume-based production model will be less likely to be challenged, along with the full range of environmental and human costs that are inherent in that model,” says Podoll. “In that case, it will be even more crucial for public involvement and stakeholder voices to
be very strongly incorporated into the process that CalRecycle sets up for providing guidance and oversight to the implementation of the bill.”

*Sign up to receive the Vogue Business newsletter for the latest luxury news and insights, plus exclusive membership discounts.*

*Comments, questions or feedback? Email us at feedback@voguebusiness.com.*

More sustainability stories from *Vogue Business*

- [Why celebrity brands should be held to account](#) on sustainability
- [Renewcell secures a future](#)
- [How to sell sustainable fashion, sustainably](#)
- [Can fashion mend its relationship with Indigenous communities?](#)
- [Fashion's textile recycling problem? It doesn't exist](#)

---

**VOGUE BUSINESS RECOMMENDS**

**FASHION**
- [The Vogue Business TikTok Trend Tracker](#)

**BEAUTY**
- [The Vogue Business Beauty Trend Tracker](#)

**SUSTAINABILITY**
- Shifting design, adjusting profits: Inside Ganni’s sustainability-…

**FASHION**
- The Vogue Business Spring/Summer 2025 menswear size…
What would fashion look like if women were in charge?

Discover our latest package featuring five insightful articles that explore the blockers and solutions for women in the fashion industry.

READ NOW