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The Thread (TOMRA Textiles)

The textiles value chain is broken. Closing the gap will require technology, regulations and collaboration.

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Michael at Homeboy Threads, in front of the demo unit.

Thread #9: Michael learns to autosort



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February 29, 2024

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"I didn't know that much about how to operate computers, because over the years when they became widely available, I was in prison," Michael told me. Still, he is the main on-site operator of the [TOMRA](#) Autosort machine demonstrated this week at [Homeboy Threads](#) in LA.



Manual sorting for reuse at Homeboy Threads.

Homeboy Threads is a part of [Homeboy Industries](#), the world's largest gang-rehabilitation program – based in LA. Started as a jobs-training initiative for ex-convicts, the social enterprise has provided thousands of people with a new starting point in life. The Homeboys are well known for refurbishing and eventually dismantling home electronics, and for running a popular café in downtown LA. Over the past two years, they have also been sorting used textiles – both for reuse, and for recycling.



Photo: Homeboy Threads

A textile powerhouse that needs to turn greener

Because in addition to being the home of entertainment and showbusiness, Los Angeles has traditionally been a strong hub for textiles. In four years, the city will host the Olympics, and ambitious city officials are already planning to make them the most sustainable games ever. Making

that happen means something needs to be done with the city's waste streams. Looking at textiles alone, the surplus of used textiles sits at 70,000 tons. This consists of textiles that have been used once in film sets, to production scraps from fashion manufacturing plants, to deadstock and unsold goods, to collected textiles from consumers. Much of this can be reused, redesigned, or remanufactured – but much of it cannot.



Commissioner Susana Reyes in conversation with event participants. Photo: Homeboy Threads.

For LA to meet its ambitious climate goals, it is necessary to radically change the way its waste resources are used, reused, discarded and eventually recycled. Studies done by [LA Sanitation & Environment](#) show that food and textile waste are the most significant and challenging waste streams. Together with [California Product Stewardship Council](#), they went looking for solutions to make textiles more circular. Enter TOMRA's sorting technology – which is also the reason Michael at Homeboy Threads laments his choice not to learn about computers earlier. Since early January, he has been training with TOMRA staff to operate the Autosort unit placed in the Homeboy warehouse in Commerce in LA County.



Photo: Homeboy Threads.

Demonstrating what industrial scale sorting could look like

At this week's demonstration, Michael was in charge of operating the machine to show how its sensors could identify material compositions and color, sorting material with high precision and high speed. The audience consisted of important stakeholders ranging from Commissioner [Susana Reyes](#), running LA's Public Works Commission, to representatives from LA Department of Sanitation and Environment, to sustainability and innovation leaders from global and local brands, fashion designers, tech companies and activist groups.



Commissioner Reyes speaking to the audience at Homeboy Threads. Norwegian Consul to LA Hege Fossum (left, first row)

Collaboration and other key beliefs

“Collaboration is key to building circular value chains,” said TOMRA’s [Louisa Hoyes](#) as she introduced the demonstration, highlighting the forward-leaning role of public entities and NGOs in the LA area. She also emphasized the importance of legislation and incentives, both to drive consumers habits and attitudes and to facilitate investments in infrastructure – and the opportunity to collect and make use of massive amounts of data. “Transparency and traceability from a robust digital core is key, and what better place to demonstrate this than in a tech hub like California?” she asked.



Lousia Hoyes speaking at the event. Photo: Homeboy Threads.

In addition to the technology demonstration, the event included an exhibition from partners to the [California Product Stewardship Council](#), as well as a panel discussion led by the CPSC’s [Joanne B.](#)

Seeing is believing

There are many [TOMRA Recycling](#) machines in the US, but there is only one sorting textile waste. That’s the unit placed at Homeboy Threads’ facility floor. “To imagine what sorting technology can do for textiles, whether to supercharge sorting for reuse or to scale sorting for recycling, it is always better to see it in practice. We’re grateful and proud to have been able to house our unit at Homeboy Threads since the beginning of this year, and are looking forward to continuing conversations with innovative and forward-leaning partners also going forward,” Louisa concluded.



Live demo of the TOMRA unit.

And Michael? He will be doing his computer course now.

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Seeing is believing. That's a key takeaway [Louisa Hoyes](#) and I are taking back from this week's LA demo of the [TOMRA](#) unit doing automated textile sorting at the facility of [Homeboy Threads](#). On Thursday, we hosted around 100 guests who enthusiastically clapped whenever air nozzles shot out to move a 100% polyester garment into the right compartment. Thanks to [California Product Stewardship Council](#), [LA Sanitation & Environment](#) and [Homeboy Industries](#) for a great event and for an exciting collaboration so far. [#circulartextiles](#) [#textilerecycling](#) [#TOMRAtextiles](#)

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 **TOMRA** 5h ...

We're delighted to hear that our technology impressed so many! ❤️

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 **Elisa Johnson** • 2nd
Business Development Professional 3h ...

To Louisa, Jo and all of the Tomra crew that supported the event---thank you for the partnership and collaboration! And--for spot lighting the meaningful work of our community, giving a special nod to Michael.

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