

It's Time to Invest In Our Clothing: Clothing Repair, Reuse, & Repurposing Are No Longer An Option, But A Necessity

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By Joanne Brasch and Olivia Sullivan

Clothing shouldn't be disposable, but that is often how it is treated. In 2018, synthetic clothing and other textiles were the 5th most common material thrown out by single-family households in California. By combining the subcategories of organic textiles (1.1%), synthetic and mixed textiles (1.6%), and shoes, leather, and purses (0.3%), textiles accounted for 3% of California's overall waste in 2018.

And this problem is only getting worse. Textile waste is the fastest growing waste stream in the country. The U.S. has doubled its clothing waste from 7 to 14 million tons in the past two decades—processing unwanted clothing as trash at a higher and higher cost, rather than capturing the material to resell or turn into new products.



The good news is that some brands work to extend the life of their garments and save clothes from landfill. By establishing take-back programs where used clothing is collected, some of the best brand-led programs prioritize repair, reuse, and repurposing of clothing over recycling and disposal. For example, Patagonia's program, Worn Wear, renews garments and returns them to customers and sells discounted pre-owned gear thanks to shoppers who sell their used items back to the company. Eileen Fisher runs a clothing buy-back program and secondhand clothing store chain under its Renew brand, promising to either find the garments new homes or rework the material into new merchandise. Outerknown jeans are “guaranteed for life” and will be repaired if possible or replaced and recycled if not.

Other clothing take-back programs deliver clothing to organizations and designers specializing in clothing reuse and repair. Through REI's Give Back Box program, anyone can pack a box with unwanted clothing items from any brand, visit REI's website to print a prepaid shipping label, and ship the items directly to Goodwill. The North Face runs a

program called Clothes the Loop, offering customers discounts for donating unwanted clothing and footwear from any brand and in any condition at store locations. The collected items are then rehomed or recycled by the non-profit Soles4Souls.

But voluntary action from brands is not enough to solve this huge problem and the lack of transparency limits insight into program efficiency and reuse rates. Despite efforts from a handful of clothing brands, most companies do not operate clothing take-back programs and some existing take-back programs are ineffective at rescuing usable material.

Many clothing brands are relatively new to the re-commerce clothing market, so the infrastructure in place to handle unwanted clothing mainly relies on charities and nonprofit secondhand stores. Collecting, sorting, and grading unwanted garments is a big task, and these stores and nonprofits try to the best of their ability to resell and extend the life of clothing items. However, some items are unsellable in stores.

On average, charities only sell 20 percent of all collected clothing donations at their storefront locations. The majority of donated clothes are shipped overseas, sent to manual recyclers, or, after taking a slightly longer route, disposed of in landfills or incinerated.

Unfortunately, this problem has only been exacerbated due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Many thrift stores and charities have been closed for months without the necessary staff to sort through trash bags stuffed with unwanted clothes. Yet, donations have kept coming—and at high rates, due to people trapped at home cleaning out their closets. This increased supply in donations, coupled with a decreased demand for clothing, has forced the shops and charities that dominate the secondhand clothing market to send perfectly good clothes and functional materials to landfill or incineration.

As local and state governments navigate their waste diversion goals, many are looking to policy interventions as a means to engage more brands in finding waste management solutions for the products they put on the market. One of the best policy solutions to transform our current wasteful clothing economy into a regenerative and circular system is Extended Producer Responsibility (EPR).

EPR is a policy approach that engages producers in solutions for hard to manage products on complex issues such as increasing landfill diversion, developing a convenient collection infrastructure, identifying issues of recyclability, and using the most environmentally preferable processes on the unwanted materials. Producer responsibility requires brands to share the cost burden for the end-of-life management for the products they put on the market.

Importantly, producer responsibility programs support repair, reuse, repurposing, and recycling goals. Financial incentives encourage processors and designers to use material collected from the program to create new consumable goods. For example, a designer using

repurposed denim for products sold on Etsy could source materials from a designated program, tapping into financial support for post-consumer material feedstock and business development opportunities, including more jobs and regional manufacturing.

In this way, EPR programs can actually spur improvements in the quality of the materials being used and the clothing created. Producer responsibility legislation incentivizes brands to engage more efficient clothing collection systems and design products using renewed and recycled material by giving them direct access to material feedstock for new products.

There's evidence from abroad that producer responsibility legislation really works for clothing. Since 2006, France—the only country currently implementing EPR policy for clothing and other textiles—has seen a threefold increase in the collection rates of post-consumer textiles.

It's possible to eliminate a major part of the waste stream by expanding textile sorting closer to home and investing in the incredible and untapped potential of re-commerce. Doing so in a way that prioritizes reuse and repurposing to avoid unnecessary recycling when fabrics are reusable can save valuable material and clothing, getting us one step closer to solving fashion's waste problem.

We invite more brands to launch take-back programs prioritizing reuse and repurpose and invest in collection and sorting infrastructure, as local governments cannot bear the cost burden. Contact the California Product Stewardship Council (CPSC) for more information on pilot projects and policy development happening in California, and U.S. PIRG to join a coalition to tackle this environmental problem.

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