

California

Clothes piling up in your closet? A landmark California bill would mandate brands recycle them

California could become the first state to tackle the fast fashion waste overwhelming consumers and landfills



☑ If passed, Californians can bring unwanted and damaged apparel and household textiles to thrift stores, charities and other collection sites throughout the state. Photograph: FilippoBacchi/Getty Images

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Tue 24 Sep 2024 10:00 EDT

Let's say you bought a new pair of jeans and wore them for a few years before deciding it was time to part ways. You could throw them away, or, if you wanted a more **environmentally friendly** option, you might try to sell or **swap** them or donate them to a local thrift store.

Either way, the onus is on you to pass those jeans on, and hope for the best. But a new **California** bill that tackles the growing problem of **fashion and textile waste** could change the way we get rid of our clothes, putting the burden on clothing producers to implement a system for recycling the wares that they sell.

If passed, Californians will be able to bring unwanted and even damaged apparel and household textiles to thrift stores, charities and other accessible collection sites throughout the state for sorting and recycling. This first-in-the-nation bill, known as the Responsible Textile Recovery Act, requires producers of apparel, towels, bedding and upholstery to implement and fund a statewide reuse, repair and recycling program for their products.

Since 1960, the amount of textile waste generated in the US has increased nearly tenfold, exceeding more than 17m tonnes in 2018. A shocking 85% of all textiles end up in landfills where they emit methane gas and leach chemicals and dyes into our soil and groundwater. And only **about 15%** of clothing and other textiles gets reused, even though an estimated **95% of the materials** - including fabrics, yarns, fibers, zippers and buttons - are recyclable.

These disturbing numbers drove Josh Newman, the Democratic state senator who sponsored the bill, into action. "We worked really hard to consult with and eventually to align all of the stakeholders in the life cycle of textiles so that at the end there was no opposition," he said of the bill, which was passed with **broad support** from state legislators last month, and is now on the desk of the California governor, **Gavin Newsom**. "That's an immensely hard thing to do when you consider the magnitude of the problem and all of the very different interests."

Newman's bill had more than 150 endorsements from environmental organizations, municipal waste managers and retailers such as Ikea, Everlane and Goodwill. Supporters of the landmark legislation say it will help the industry transition to a sustainable and circular economy, which could unlock new environmentally beneficial production and consumption opportunities and create more than 1,000 **green jobs**.

Under the authority of the state's recycling department, the bill would incentivize manufacturers to adopt less wasteful practices and create greener designs, making manufacturers responsible for their products along the entire lifecycle.

Some details about how the whole system will work remain unknown, as the companies that produce apparel and other textiles sold in California would have until 2026 to create a non-profit organization that will design the collection sites, mail-back programs or other solutions.

The program won't be operational until 2028 at the earliest.

"As a global fashion retailer, we have an important role to play and that is why we are transforming our business towards circularity and reducing emissions," said Randi Marshall, regional head of sustainability and public affairs for H&M Americas. She added that because France and the Netherlands have similar laws, the company is already familiar with how this can work. In France, that means people can take clothing and shoes to one of **47,000** collection points for recycling and they **subsidize** repairs to encourage people to keep goods longer.

The fashion industry is a leading industrial polluter, responsible for about **10%** of global carbon emissions, more than international flights and maritime shipping combined. The rise of "**fast fashion**", or low-cost, low-quality garments that are only worn a few times, is a major contributor to the escalating environmental crisis.

Some have expressed concern that the legislation could raise costs for consumers and affect smaller and mid-sized brands. But sustainable fashion designer Yotam Solomon, creator of the Los Angeles-based indie genderless fashion brand Virtue, said he supported the bill. "I think [California's new law] is something that should have been done a long time ago," he said. "It's unfortunately this industry that allowed this to happen."

Newman said consumers shouldn't feel any price increases, and estimated that the cost to producers would be less than 10 cents per garment or textile.

Dr Joanne Brasch, director of advocacy and outreach for the **California Product Stewardship Council**, who co-sponsored the new legislation, said we're going to pay for fashion and textile waste one way or another. "Our garbage bills will go up if the cities have to figure it out, our taxes are going to go up if we have to remediate environmental damage," she said.



Waste fabric and clothes in the Atacama desert in Alto Hospicio, Chile, on 15 June 2023. The region is threatened with environmental pollution due to thousands of tons of plastic waste, garbage textiles and rubble piles. Photograph: Anadolu Agency/Getty Images

In 2021 alone, about 1.2m tons of textiles were discarded in California, costing taxpayers more than **\$70m**.

Brasch noted that brands such as Gap, Reformation, Patagonia and the North Face had spent millions of dollars trying to become **circular**, but had struggled to connect the waste industry with the manufacturing industry.

Historically, thrift stores, charities and clothing collectors have been a successful secondhand market for reusable textiles. But when donations are damaged or unusable, they often end up in landfills or in overseas markets in the global south, with countries like **Ghana** receiving as many as **15m** discarded garments, known locally as "dead white man's clothes", each week. Disturbing photos of mountains of old clothing have been seen everywhere from the **Dandora dumpsite** in Kenya to the deserts of **Chile**.

Organizations like the Or Foundation, which advocates for better fashion waste management, are calling for the ending of this phenomenon, known as **waste colonialism**, and support extended producer responsibility programs like the one California is implementing.

European countries were the first to tackle the textile waste problem with legislation. **France**, which was previously only able to divert 18% of its textile waste back to reuse, passed a textile recycling law in 2007. Today, the country's diversion rate is over **39%**. In 2023, the Netherlands created its own program and the **European Union** has mandated expanded textile collection for all member states by 2025, which is expected to move the needle when it comes to fashion waste.

"We learned from a lot of the advocates involved in France's program and they've been very active to make sure that what California does can be replicated positively," said Brasch, a scientist and former UC Davis professor. "Being the first [in the US] doesn't always mean being the best. We hope other states reach out to us and I can explain how to raise the bar."