

Putting fast fashion out of fashion

The EU is leading the global pathway towards sustainable clothing... but a course correction is needed.



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Do more. Go further. Be ambitious. That's the message to industry from consumers, investors and policymakers when it comes to tackling the biggest issues we face as a society. Attitudes are changing and we are demanding more from businesses, not least when it comes to the environment.

Europe has a history of leading the way in sustainability measures, so it is no surprise that the EU wants to promote a more sustainable textiles industry. The European Union is intent on "putting fast fashion out of fashion". That is the very clear ambition for the EU's strategy for sustainable and circular textiles.

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These efforts are laudable and, if done right, could have a huge impact. Textiles are the fourth largest cause of environmental harm after food, housing, and transport [according to the European Environment Agency](#).

Between 2000 and 2014, [global clothing production more than doubled](#). We are buying more clothes than ever before and throwing them away even faster. This [problem of overconsumption](#), fueled by a surge in production of cheap, fossil fuel-based textiles, must be addressed. Fossil fuel-based fibers, such as [polyester, recycled polyester and nylon, now make up 62 percent of global fiber production](#), and this is expected to continue growing rapidly. When fewer and better products are produced, it will be possible to use those we have for longer, and circular textile models such as repair, rental, reuse and recycling will become viable.

The European Commission is seeking to address the environmental damage done by the textiles industry and make the transition to a circular textile economy. The EU Ecodesign for Sustainable Products Regulation and the upcoming proposal for the substantiation of green claims are both critical efforts.

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The Commission has cited the Product Environmental Footprint (PEF) methodology as a possible tool to deliver those pieces of legislation. But the methodology is out of date. It doesn't include indicators for microplastic pollution, plastic waste and circularity that are critical for the EU if it wants to achieve its goals.

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Put simply, the EU cannot manage what it does not measure. Failing to include these indicators targeted at fast fashion will give brands license to greenwash, guiding well-intended consumers to unintentionally purchase more, rather than less, fossil fuel-based, fast fashion products.

Adding these new indicators to PEF, and giving them sufficient weighting against the other 16 indicators to have meaningful impact on the overall PEF score, is vital to influencing consumer choices and delivering the EU's goals.

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Synthetic clothing accounts for [more than a third of primary microplastic release](#) to the world's oceans. It should be reflected in the overall PEF score as a main indicator. Too much is known about the scale of microplastic pollution and its environmental impacts to hide this information from consumers.

Circularity must be prioritized in any tool that is being used to deliver on the EU's circular economy goals. The Commission claims that circularity is already addressed in PEF. But its definition of circularity is extremely narrow — especially compared to credible indicators such as the [Ellen MacArthur Foundation's Material Circularity Indicator](#) — omitting or under-weighting important attributes such as biological circularity.

A clearly-defined plastic waste indicator is also necessary given the [significant contribution of synthetic clothing to fast fashion](#), Europe's [landfills are overflowing with discarded clothing](#) and the goals of the [EU's Plastics Strategy](#). This is not a controversial idea — [solid waste production is the least-preferred option in the EU waste hierarchy](#). Current PEF calculations for a polyester sweater demonstrate that the score only increases by 0.7 percent if the sweater goes to landfill, because of the minimal prioritization placed on plastic waste. This is not enough for a product that will not biodegrade and will remain in landfill indefinitely.

Ensuring that consumers can easily access reliable information about a garment's environmental impact and make responsible purchasing choices is key to driving the necessary changes in the textiles sector. In an industry flooded with greenwashing, facilitated by brand-dominated and self-governed definitions of sustainability, the need for regulation and harmonized claims for consumers has never been more important.

This was recently signaled by consumer authorities in [both the Netherlands and Norway](#) when they issued joint guidance on the use of the Higg Material Sustainability Index (MSI) tool to communicate product sustainability, stating that environmental claims based on the Higg MSI methodology need to be revised to mitigate the risk of misleading consumers. The two authorities send a timely and important message to the fashion industry and governments: environmental claims need to be accurate if they are to empower consumers to make well-informed and truly impactful purchasing decisions.

Only with a change in course will the EU reach its goals sooner, meet the high expectations society has for its leaders and put fast fashion out of fashion.