



## New report lays bare the fashion industry's addiction to fossil fuels and urges sweeping EU legislative action.

*Under embargo until 00:01 CET on Wednesday 3 February*

- *The global fashion industry has become dangerously dependent on cheap synthetic fibres, which are made from fossil fuels such as oil and gas.*
- *Rapid growth in synthetic fibres, such as polyester, is creating an escalating environmental catastrophe, with the consequences for health only just being uncovered.*
- *The Netherlands is a frontrunner in the EU in collecting textile waste, but other EU countries are lagging behind.*
- *The Dutch Agreement on Sustainable Textiles, though progressive, is voluntary and has been criticised for falling short on transparency.*
- *The EU must now take urgent legislative action to bring the textile and apparel industry in line with the goals of the Paris Agreement and the European Green Deal.*

The global fashion industry has developed a dangerous addiction to synthetic fibres, which are made from climate-destroying fossil fuels like oil and gas, to power its fast fashion business model, according to a [new report](#).

The report, [Fossil Fashion: The Hidden Reliance of Fashion on Fossil Fuels](#)<sup>i</sup>, charts how the use of synthetic fibres, especially polyester, has doubled in textiles in the last 20 years, and is likely to continue growing to reach nearly three quarters of total global fibre production in 2030, with polyester accounting for 85% of this share.

Textiles are used in all sorts of products like clothing, shoes, carpets or furniture, though the fashion sector accounted for more than 70% of the global textiles market in 2019.<sup>ii</sup>

Today, polyester is already found in more than half of all textiles. While the footprint of polyester production in 2015 was the equivalent of 700m tonnes of CO<sub>2</sub>, comparable to the total annual emissions of Mexico or 180 coal-fired power stations, that figure is expected to nearly double by 2030.

In addition, the oil and gas industry is betting big on plastics, from which polyester and synthetic fibres are made, as revenue from other sectors, such as transport and energy, declines. Much of the future growth in demand for oil is projected to come from the production of plastics, with BP estimating the share could be as high as 95%. Production of synthetic fibres is also getting dirtier, with feedstock coming from fracked gas<sup>iii</sup> and multi-billion-dollar investments from a major Chinese polyester producer to convert coal into polyester yarn.<sup>iv</sup>

The report also finds a striking correlation between the rise of polyester and the explosion of cheap, low-quality clothing that is causing a mounting waste crisis. Some brands are now churning out as many as 20 collections per year, and globally people are buying 60% more clothes than 15 years ago, yet wearing them for half as long. This trend is projected to worsen as global fashion production leaps from 62 million tonnes in 2015 to 102 million tonnes in 2030.

Surveys show that these trends are at odds with what the Dutch want from the sector. Currently, the average Dutch person consumes 14kg of new clothing per year.<sup>v</sup> One survey from 2019 found almost



nine in ten people wanted longer-lasting clothes (87%), with a similar number (89%) disagreeing that clothes should be made at the lowest possible price.<sup>vi</sup>

**Urška Trunk**, Campaign Manager at the Changing Markets Foundation, said:

*“Not many consumers are aware that fast fashion is fossil fashion. The addiction of fashion brands to cheap polyester and other oil-derived fibres is coming at a time when the world is moving away from fossil fuels. But instead of moving away from synthetic fibres, which are causing an ecological disaster, brands want you to think they’ve got this under control and they can keep producing ever more clothes.”*

### **Mountains of waste and oceans of microfibres**

Fashion’s addiction to synthetic fibres and runaway consumption of cheap clothes is leading to untenable quantities of clothing waste, with 87% of clothing material either incinerated, landfilled or dumped in nature. During use, washing and disposal, synthetic clothes also leach tiny fibres that are invisible to the eye. These ‘microfibres’ do not biodegrade, meaning they stay in the environment forever.

As a result, microfibres are now found everywhere, from the Arctic oceans to our food chains, lungs and stomachs. Microfibres are also present in 80% of our tap water and have even been found in the placentas of unborn babies. The health consequences are still emerging, but microfibres are known to harm sea creatures and preliminary studies show they could disrupt lung development.

**Laura Díaz Sánchez**, Campaigner at the Plastic Soup Foundation, said:

*“This is an urgent wake up call. We are already eating and breathing what we are wearing because our clothes are constantly shedding microfibres. Since microfibres do not break down naturally, we are going to have to live with them forever. This could have devastating consequences for our health, but it also effectively saddles our future generations with a problem that the fast fashion industry has the tools to solve.”*

### **The EU must step up to the plate**

Despite the grand statements, pledges and a multitude of misleading green labels and initiatives, the fashion industry has failed to make headway in reversing its catastrophic impact on the environment, or in reducing its dependence on fossil fuels.<sup>vii</sup>

More than 7 in 10 Dutch people (72%) felt they could not always trust the environmental claims made for clothing products.<sup>viii</sup>

The Netherlands has progressive legislation in place to reduce the use of virgin raw materials by 50% by 2030 and to collect textile waste. Currently, 45% of all textile waste is collected separately from other waste, with 53% being reused, 33% expected to be recycled, and 14% ending up as waste.<sup>ix</sup> Although this legislation is promising, it is insufficient to bring about the sector-wide transformation needed, and the EU needs to step up to the plate.

An agreement exists since 2016 between industry associations, trade unions, NGOs, and the Dutch Government to improve working conditions, prevent pollution and promote animal welfare in countries where fashion items are produced. However, NGOs have criticised the agreement for falling short on transparency, engagement with rightsholders and remediation,<sup>x</sup> and the agreement has remained voluntary.



As the largest importer of textile and apparel in the world,<sup>xi</sup> the EU has the opportunity to show leadership through action. With the European Commission currently preparing its textile strategy, due later this year, the Changing Markets Foundation urges it to lay out a comprehensive plan to slow down the rate of consumption of clothes. This can be done by decoupling the fashion industry from fossil fuels, increasing the quality of materials, for example through eco-design measures, and by requiring that the textile industry be responsible for the end-of-life of their products. In this way clothes must be separately collected, reused, repaired, and the industry should start investing into viable fibre-to-fibre recycling technologies.

The Commission must ensure any COVID Recovery Package funds are made conditional on brands becoming more sustainable and are not used to prop up the failing fast fashion model which is spelling disaster for the environment and workers, and short-changing citizens in the long run.

**Urska Trunk**, Campaign Manager at the Changing Markets Foundation, said:

*“We’re buying more, wearing it less, throwing it out faster, and more and more of it now comes from fossil fuels. We know that the fashion industry won’t solve this problem on its own. Although the Netherlands has progressive legislation in place to tackle some of the problems with fashion, it can not bring about single-handedly the transformation the planet needs. The European Commission needs to come forward with a wide-ranging textile strategy that overhauls the dependence of fashion on fossil fuels and puts the industry on a more sustainable footing. As one of the biggest textile markets, the EU has a terrific opportunity to address a blind spot which is endangering our ability to live within the planet’s limits.”*

## ENDS

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The full report can be accessed [here](#).

**About Changing Markets** | [www.changingmarkets.org](http://www.changingmarkets.org) | [@ChangingMarkets](https://twitter.com/ChangingMarkets)

The Changing Markets Foundation partners with NGOs on market-focused campaigns. Our mission is to expose irresponsible corporate practices and drive change towards a more sustainable economy.

**About the Plastic Soup Foundation** | [www.plasticsoupfoundation.org/](http://www.plasticsoupfoundation.org/) | [@plasticoupfoun](https://twitter.com/plasticoupfoun)

Plastic Soup Foundation is an Amsterdam-based NGO focused on stopping plastic pollution at the source. Their motto: “No plastic waste in our water or our bodies”.

### **About Zero Waste Alliance Ukraine**

Zero Waste Alliance Ukraine is a public association that unites Ukrainian zero waste initiatives, created by Zero Waste Lviv, Zero Waste Kharkiv and Zero Waste Society (Kyiv) in 2019.

**About the Clean Clothes Campaign** | <https://cleanclothes.org> | [@cleanclothes](https://twitter.com/cleanclothes)

Clean Clothes Campaign is a global network dedicated to improving working conditions and empowering workers in the global garment and sportswear industries.

**About WeMoveEU** | <https://www.wemove.eu/> | [@wemoveEU](https://twitter.com/wemoveEU)

WeMove.EU is an independent and values-based organisation that seeks to build people power to transform Europe in the name of our community, future generations and the planet.

No Plastic in my Sea | <https://noplasticinmysea.org/> | [@noplasticFrance](https://twitter.com/noplasticFrance)

The association No Plastic In My Sea aims to fight against plastic pollution and its consequences on the marine ecosystem.

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<sup>i</sup> Today's report has been released jointly by the Changing Markets Foundation, the Plastic Soup Foundation, the Clean Clothes Campaign, Zero Waste Alliance Ukraine, No Plastic in my Sea and WeMove.EU.

<sup>ii</sup> Fashion and clothing is the largest consumer of textiles. In terms of volume, the fashion sector held a considerable share of **over 70.0%** of the total market in 2019. See Grand View Research, *Textile Market Size, Share & Trends Analysis Report, 2020-2027* (2020) <https://www.grandviewresearch.com/industry-analysis/textile-market>.

<sup>iii</sup> Stand.earth, *Fashion forward: A roadmap to fossil free fashion* (2020) <https://www.stand.earth/sites/stand/files/standearth-fashionforward-roadmaptofossilfreefashion.pdf>

<sup>iv</sup> Chen. A (2020) China's Hengli makes bold \$20 billion bet to spin coal into fabric. *Reuters*, 29 July 2020. [ONLINE] Available at: <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-china-coal-polyester-hengli-focus-idUSKCN24UOMA>

<sup>v</sup> ECAP, *Used Textile Collection in European Cities* (1 March 2018) [http://www.ecap.eu.com/wp-content/uploads/2018/07/ECAP-Textile-collection-in-European-cities\\_full-report\\_with-summary.pdf](http://www.ecap.eu.com/wp-content/uploads/2018/07/ECAP-Textile-collection-in-European-cities_full-report_with-summary.pdf).

<sup>vi</sup> European Commission, *Protecting the environment – Eurobarometer survey* (2020) <https://ec.europa.eu/commfrontoffice/publicopinion/index.cfm/survey/getSurveydetail/instruments/special/surveyky/2257>.

<sup>vii</sup> Changing Markets Foundation, *The False Promise of Certification: how certification is hindering sustainability in the textiles, palm oil and fisheries industries* (2018) [https://dirtyfashion.info/assets/reports/THE\\_FALSE\\_PROMISE\\_OF\\_CERTIFICATION\\_FINAL\\_WEB.pdf](https://dirtyfashion.info/assets/reports/THE_FALSE_PROMISE_OF_CERTIFICATION_FINAL_WEB.pdf).

<sup>viii</sup> European Commission, *Protecting the environment – Eurobarometer survey* (2020) <https://ec.europa.eu/commfrontoffice/publicopinion/index.cfm/survey/getSurveydetail/instruments/special/surveyky/2257>.

<sup>ix</sup> University of Wageningen, *Improving Dutch post-consumer textile recycling* (2020) <https://www.wur.nl/en/show/Improving-Dutch-post-consumer-textile-recycling.htm>.

<sup>x</sup> Clean Clothes Campaign and SOMO, *Dutch Agreement on Sustainable Garments and Textile* (June 2020) [https://www.somo.nl/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/SKC\\_AGT\\_rapport.pdf](https://www.somo.nl/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/SKC_AGT_rapport.pdf).

<sup>xi</sup> World Atlas, *Top 10 Textile Importing Countries In The World* (30 January 2020) <https://www.worldatlas.com/articles/top-10-textile-importing-countries-in-the-world.html>