



MAKE THE LABEL COUNT



DO CLOTHES CONTRIBUTE TO THE MICROPLASTICS PROBLEM?

Not all clothes shed microplastics.
Clothing sustainability claims should account for this.

Feedback on Microplastics Pollution – RESPONSE 16 December 2021

Microplastic pollution is a global challenge across many industries and sectors – one of critical importance being textiles.

Global textile consumption has become 1) more reliant on non-renewable resources, 2) less biodegradable, and 3) increasingly prone to releasing microplastics. A 2021 study¹ acknowledges that microfibres from textiles are among the most common microplastic materials found in the marine environment. Every time synthetic clothes are manufactured², worn, washed³⁴⁵⁶, or disposed of, they release microplastics into terrestrial and marine environments, including human food chains. Synthetic fibres represent 69% of all materials used in textiles, and if current trends continue, that proportion will rise to 73% by 2030.⁷ The production of synthetic fibres has fuelled a 40-year trend⁸ of increased per capita clothing production (i.e. fast fashion), which translates directly into increased waste.

Increased production and consumption of synthetic textiles remains unchecked. Thus, the rapid growth of the textile industry parallels the intentional addition of microplastics to products such as cosmetics⁹. The contrast is that the European Chemicals Agency¹⁰ has recommended such intentional additions be restricted, whereas the over-consumption of synthetic fibres continues unchecked. One way for the EU to account for and mitigate microplastic pollution is through an EU-backed methodology measuring and reporting microplastic emissions. This publicly available information will enable consumers and procurement officers to make decisions that minimise unintentional microplastic pollution.

There is a critical opportunity to address microplastic pollution in the fashion textile industry through the EU Product Environmental Footprint (PEF) methodology. To meet the environmental objectives of the Circular Economy Action Plan, the EU is proposing that companies substantiate their products' environmental credentials using this harmonised methodology. However, microplastic pollution is not accounted for in the PEF methodology. This omission has the effect of assigning a zero-impact score

¹[Microplastic Pollution in California](#)

²[Microplastic pollution in water and sediment in a textile industrial area](#)

³[Synthetic fibres as microplastics in the marine environment: A review from textile perspective with a focus on domestic washings](#)

⁴[Quantifying shedding of synthetic fibres from textiles; a source of microplastics released into the environment](#)

⁵[Evaluation of microplastic release caused by textile washing processes of synthetic fabrics](#)

⁶[The contribution of washing processes of synthetic clothes to microplastic pollution](#)

⁷[Fossil Fashion: the hidden reliance of fast fashion on fossil fuels](#)

⁸[The environmental price of fast fashion](#)

⁹[The power of environmental norms: marine plastic pollution and the politics of microbeads](#)

¹⁰[European Chemicals Agency \(ECHA\): Proposal for a Restriction](#)

to microplastic pollution and undermines the aims of the European Green Deal to “address the unintentional release of microplastics in the environment”.¹¹

The incorporation of microplastic pollution as an indicator would increase the legitimacy of the PEF method as well as better inform consumer purchasing decisions, especially as the European Green Deal seeks to “further develop and harmonise methods for measuring unintentionally released microplastics, especially from tyres and textiles, and delivering harmonised data on microplastics concentrations in seawater”.¹²

Whilst we continue to learn about the damage of microplastics and new knowledge is emerging on the toxic impacts along the food chain, there is already sufficient information on the rate of microplastic leakage¹³ into the environment to implement a basic, inventory level indicator in the PEF now. This is consistent with the recommendations of a review¹⁴ of microplastic pollution originating from the life cycle of apparel and home textiles. There are precedents in PEF for basic level indicators (e.g., ‘resource use, fossils’) and largely untested indicators (e.g. land occupation and toxicity), and therefore a clear opportunity for the EU to include measurement and modelling of microplastic pollution emissions in the PEF methodology.

Given their effects on health and the environment, measures to reduce the volume and the release of microplastics throughout the lifecycle of synthetic textiles – including manufacturing, use and end of life – must be taken. To inform buying decisions, the Commission should also take measures to raise consumer awareness of microplastic pollution from synthetic clothing.

¹¹ [European Commission: Microplastics](#)

¹² [European Commission: Microplastics](#)

¹³ [The Plastic Leak Project](#)

¹⁴ [Microfibres from apparel and home textiles: Prospects for including microplastics in environmental sustainability assessment](#)

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**WOULDN'T IT BE GREAT
TO KNOW WHETHER CLOTHING
IS BIODEGRADABLE?**

The EU's efforts to substantiate green claims should take this into account.

