



SUBSTITUTION

5 entanglements for the textile industry on the trail towards circular economy

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“Circular economy” has been a buzzword in the policy sector for a long time. With the [Circular Economy Action Plan](#), however, much of what just used to be buzz will be put into print, forming new laws and regulations within the EU.

This past year, ChemSec has explored the topic together with ambitious industry representatives who want to use more recycled materials, but are struggling to find materials of the right quality without toxic chemicals.

A couple of weeks ago, we brought together consumer-facing textile brands and producers of recycled materials. The goal was to initiate a constructive dialogue on the topic and to give a broader understanding of the textile industry's needs when it comes to making circular economy a reality.

“Ambitious industry representatives want to use more recycled materials, but are struggling to find materials of the right quality without toxic chemicals”

We were hoping to bring some clarity to this complex issue and identify the hurdles of using and producing more recycled material. The workshop was successful, and the insights from it were numerous and interesting. Here are a few take-aways:

1. “Circular” and “sustainable” are not synonyms

The best way to make a garment sustainable is to prolong its lifespan. To achieve this, it's not uncommon to use blended fabrics, mixing for example cotton and polyester. Unfortunately, this can make the garment difficult to recycle, since recyclers cannot “unblend” the fabric to its original components.

In addition, if the quality of a recycled material is too poor, producers might be obliged to blend the material, which might make it harder to recycle a second time.

This means that having a sustainable production is not necessarily synonymous with having a circular production – yet.

2. Leave the tags, please!

Garments cannot be recycled if it's impossible to determine what materials – not to mention what chemicals – they contain. When tags are cut away or unreadable due to substantial use, it hinders the recycling process.

Employees at recycling companies often have to resort to their sense of touch in order to categorize the different textiles. Identifying chemicals with this method is of course impossible.

Companies that wish to buy recycled materials need to make sure they are compliant with legislation, as well as their own chemicals management. This makes the lack of information a very big problem.

3. ...or we could just rely on technology

New technologies could help us better understand what materials are being recycled, even if the tags are cut away. Special markers within the textile could help recyclers identify different materials, as well as chemical content.

Of course, this demands a common standard that doesn't exist yet.

4. Pre-consumer recycling doesn't quite cut it

Today, a lot of what is being recycled has never been used by a consumer. To recycle pre-consumer goods is basically the easiest way to maintain control of the material contents, since the original producer is the only one who has handled the garment. It allows for the recycler to keep tight track of the production chain.

However, this kind of limited recycling is not what we have in mind when we talk about circular economy.

5. Like a virgin

The textile brands and recyclers agreed that similar standards should apply for recycled materials as for virgin ones. They also concluded that regulation will be needed to create a well-functioning circular economy.

ChemSec will continue to work on the relevant policy projects related to the *Circular economy action plan*, for example the *EU Strategy for Textiles* that is due to start in 2021.

The workshop on textiles in the circular economy is but a first step. We are looking forward to continue the constructive dialogue with all who joined the workshop.

Take-aways from other recent workshops

ChemSec recently hosted two other workshops on related topics, featuring participants from well-known brands and recyclers. Read more:

[Many bright ideas on how to improve recycling of plastics in electronics](#)

[Plastic packaging in focus when brands and recyclers gathered to discuss circular economy](#)

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