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Recycled Textile Associations Unite to Combat Media Misconceptions of Secondhand Clothing Industry

The Secondary Materials and Recycled Textiles Association (SMART) and the Textile Recycling Association (TRA) today issued a joint statement in response to negative and unfavorable media coverage.

ABINGDON, Md. (October 27, 2016)— On the heels of recent news coverage in both Newsweek ([September 9](#)) and the Huffington Post ([September 19](#) and [September 28](#)) that cast the secondhand clothing industry in a less than favorable light, trade associations in both the U.S. and the U.K. today issued a response to clarify the negative coverage presented while reinforcing the worldwide value of the recycled textile movement.

SMART Executive Director Jackie King and TRA Director Alan Wheeler prepared the following joint statement:

The U.S.-based Secondary Materials and Recycled Textiles Association (SMART) and U.K.-based Textile Recycling Association (TRA) want the general public to fully understand the tremendous social, economic and environmental value of reusing and recycling unwanted clothing.

According to the Bureau of International Recycling Textiles Division, the recycled textiles industry generates both environmental and economic benefits, reducing the need for landfill space, lessening pressure on virgin resources, slashing pollution as well as energy and water consumption and cutting down the need for dyes and fixing agents. Worldwide, more than 60 percent of clothes can be reused, and another 35 percent are recycled into wiping rags or are converted into basic fibers and made into new products. This leaves less than five percent that must be discarded.

According to a report conducted by the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) in 2013, 15.13 million tons of textiles ended up in the waste stream (landfills or incinerators). Of that, 15.2 percent was recovered for reuse or recycling. In total, 12.83 million tons of textiles—for perspective, the equivalent of more than two million average-sized male elephants--ended up in the waste stream in 2013.

The spring 2016 Textiles Market Situation Report issued by the nonprofit U.K.-based Waste and Resources Action Programme (WRAP) estimates that while 650,000 tons of textiles were collected for reuse and recycling in the U.K. in 2014, an additional 620,000 tons remained in the residual waste stream in England, Wales and Northern Ireland.

There are a variety of factors contributing to the textile waste issue, including high textile consumption, lack of recycling awareness, and lack of infrastructure to manage textile recycling. Developed countries like the U.S. and U.K. continue to consume a high amount of textile products, especially with the rise of the fast fashion industry.

However, most people do not view textiles as a household recyclable like paper, plastic, aluminum and glass, despite the fact that more than 95 percent of all textiles can be recycled or reused in some way. Further, many do not understand that the term “textiles” encompasses more than just clothing—linens, towels, pillows, footwear, accessories, bags and stuffed animals are all textile products that can be recycled or reused.

In addition to a lack of awareness, many people are unsure of where and how to recycle their textiles. Nonprofit organizations are not the only avenue for this purpose. Our collective membership base is comprised of for-profit companies (as well as the commercial fundraising arms of some U.K. charities such as the Salvation Army, Oxfam and Traid) that contribute to the textile recycling process, including collectors, collection bin operators, wiping manufacturers and fiber converters. Knowing textiles are recyclable is the first step—knowing where your closest recycler and collection bin is located is the next.

As shown by the statistics below, the production of new textiles is widely recognized as being one of the most environmentally and socially damaging industries in the world, but the reuse and recycling industry redresses much of that damaging impact.

- The annual footprint of a household’s new and existing clothing are equivalent to the weight of more than 100 pairs of jeans, the water needed to fill 1,000 bathtubs and the carbon emissions from driving an average modern car for 6,000 miles;
- Extending the average life of clothing by just three months of active use per item would lead to a five to ten percent reduction in each of their carbon, water and waste footprints.
- In terms of reducing greenhouse gas emissions, recycling two million tons of clothing per year is the equivalent of removing one million cars from U.S. roads.

Unfortunately, some of the news coverage cited gives the casual reader the impression that dumping good quality clothing in the trash after it has been donated is commonplace, when in reality, only a tiny percentage—the dirty torn rags and the like that cannot possibly be recycled—end up going for disposal.

Additionally, some of the recent news coverage has centered around the impact of textile recycling on East African countries, implying that the import of secondhand clothing into the region is hurting their local textile manufacturing industry. In reality, there are numerous countries around the world, including Pakistan, Guatemala and Honduras, which enjoy both robust manufacturing and secondhand industries.

While there were indeed periods during the 1980s and 1990s during which African textile manufacturing retracted, this can be attributed to a number of reasons including a drought that affected cotton production; increased availability of cheap cotton lint from Pakistan and India; the collapse of the Kenyan Cotton Board and the resulting withdrawal of subsidies; the import of cheap new textiles from Asia; and the abolition of the World Trade Organization's Multi-Fiber Agreement in 2005 which effectively limited the amount of new clothing China could export to developed countries. Immediately upon abolition of the agreement Chinese producers began to dominate the global markets; in the first few months of 2005 alone its exports of many textile products grew by 100 percent.

Further, even if the region was to ramp up production, it is unlikely that clothing would be affordable for those area residents, according to the research-based opinion of TRA. This is further demonstrated by the fact that most, if not all, textiles manufactured in Africa are exported for sale in developed countries, including the U.S. and U.K., as opposed to being sold where they were created. With many in the East African Community living on the equivalent of \$1.00 to \$2.00 or less per day, secondhand clothing provides many with their only affordable access to quality apparel. A recent article from Rwanda notes that with a given amount of money, a person can purchase 10 pieces of used clothing as opposed to the two pieces of clothing they could afford if forced to purchase it new. According to the same Rwandan report, 80 percent or more of the country's population could not possibly pay to clothe themselves if they had to depend on new apparel alone.

Millions of tons of secondhand clothing are in demand and being purchased globally, while very little, if any, of apparel manufactured in developing countries is sold within those countries. The secondhand clothing that U.S. and U.K. exporters ship into East Africa is prepared and selected specifically to meet the price and quality demands of East African populations. They are not unwanted goods dumped in the African market.

Ultimately, consumers should not walk away from these misleading articles thinking they might as well throw away their old clothing. The secondhand clothing industry dramatically helps close the loop on post-consumer textile waste, and provides many people around the world the only affordable access to quality apparel.

For more information on textile recycling and to find a recycler near you, visit www.smartasn.org in the U.S. or www.textile-recycling.org.uk in the U.K.

About SMART

Established in 1932, the Secondary Materials and Recycled Textiles Association (SMART) is an international nonprofit trade association that strengthens the economic opportunities of its diverse membership by promoting the interdependence of the for-profit textile recycling industry segments and providing a common forum for networking, education and trade. SMART members use and convert recycled and secondary materials from used clothing, commercial laundries and non-woven, off spec material, new mills ends and paper from around the world. SMART member companies create thousands of jobs worldwide, proving each day you can make money by being social responsible.

For more information on SMART, visit the association's website at www.smartasn.org or view the SMART Media Kit at www.smartasn.org/about/SMART_PressKitOnline.pdf. For media inquiries regarding SMART, contact Kathy Walsh at kathy.walsh@fallstongroup.com or 410-420-2001.

About TRA

The Textile Recycling Association (TRA) is the U.K.'s trade association for used clothing and textile collectors, sorters and processors.

The association was established in 1913 and was a founding member of the textiles division of the Bureau of International Recycling in 1948. Its main objectives are to represent the interests of its members internationally, nationally and locally; to be a major force in creating a favorable climate within which merchants can operate to advantage; to strengthen the economic opportunities for all our members by promoting all forms of textile recycling and the second hand clothing/shoe recycling industry; to highlight the major environmental, social and economic benefits that the industry brings both in the U.K. and in other parts of the world; and to promote best practice in the industry. For more information, visit www.textile-recycling.org.uk.