



BY BROOKE NASH

One of the Original Recyclables, Textiles Present an Opportunity to Cut Solid Waste

Here's a staggering fact: the amount of clothing that is thrown away each year in the U.S. increased 43 percent between 2003 and 2013, more than double the growth of other waste categories, according to a report from the consulting firm Resource Recycling Systems. In Massachusetts alone, residents and businesses throw away more than 250,000 tons of textiles and apparel each year. That's 5 percent of the state's solid waste. If that doesn't sound like a lot, consider that 95 percent of textile waste could have been readily recovered for productive reuse.

We are producing more textiles per capita than ever (think bedding, linens,

footwear, hats and handbags), and we continue to throw most of it away. Only about 15 percent of textiles are donated to charities or placed in clothing collection bins. The rest winds up at waste combustors or landfills.

Industry observers agree that "fast fashion" is the driving force behind the increase in textile waste, compounded by a lack of understanding about what can and should be donated to textile collectors, be they local charities, for-profit collectors or municipal collection programs. "Fast fashion" refers to the manufacture and retail sale of low-cost, low-quality clothing. The cost is so low that consumers

can update their wardrobe each season without breaking their budgets, and the clothing becomes almost disposable.

"The Good, the Bad and the Ugly"

Textiles represent low-hanging fruit in waste reduction efforts. At an average solid waste tip fee of \$65 per ton, municipalities and businesses paid about \$16 million to send this reusable material to landfills and waste combustors.

One of the biggest misconceptions about donating clothing and textiles is that the items must be in good condition. The Massachusetts Department of Environmental Protection convened textile

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recyclers from across the state to discuss barriers to textile recovery and was surprised to learn that items with rips, tears, missing buttons, and even stains are fine to donate. One collector said they want “the good, the bad and the ugly.” Torn or stained items that can’t be resold as is are baled and sold on the global commodities market or consumed locally by textile converters to make wiping rags or insulation and padding products. As long as items aren’t wet, moldy, or soaked in oil or hazardous materials, they can all go in the donation bag.



Grants Seek to Boost Reuse of Hard-to-Recycle Materials

The Baker-Polito administration last November awarded more than \$1 million in grants to help companies reuse difficult-to-recycle materials, including glass, wood, plastics and mixed recyclables. The Recycling Business Development Grant program, administered by the Massachusetts Department of Environmental Protection, will expand the recycling operations and increase the amount and quality of recycling now occurring at six businesses, located in Auburn, Freetown, Leominster, Millbury, Stoughton and Wilbraham.

At the grant announcement, Governor Charlie Baker said the state was looking to partner with private businesses and local stakeholders to increase and improve recycling. He said the Recycling Business Development grants will fund projects that promote materials recovery and will build the state’s infrastructure to better manage these materials. As a condition of receiving funding, grant recipients commit to meeting tonnage goals over a two-year period.

“To reach our waste reduction and recycling goals,” said Energy and Environmental Affairs Secretary Matthew Beaton, “we need businesses across the state to join us in our campaign to productively reuse more and more of these valuable materials.” MassDEP Commissioner Martin Suuberg said the grant recipients “will help to keep these valuable materials out of the waste stream and, instead, turn them into new products, valuable compost or a renewable energy source.”

TEXTILES PRESENT AN OPPORTUNITY TO CUT SOLID WASTE

Textiles are actually one of the original recyclables. Think of the ragman who collected torn clothing and discarded linens years ago. Today, old T-shirts, towels and flannel shirts are cut into shop rags at shops like ERC Wiping Products, a third-generation company in Lynn, and sold to automotive garages and public works facilities. And at Millbury Textile Recycling, textiles that aren't good enough for used clothing or rags are ground into an insulation material for cars and carpet backing through a process known as fiber recovery. There is a hierarchy of uses for old clothing and textiles that can handle 95 percent of unwanted, used or surplus items.

The textile collection industry is made up of for-profit and nonprofit entities whose shared goal is to increase the donation and recovery of textiles. Rather than seeing themselves as competitors, they see the landfill or incinerator as the true competition.

What's the best place to donate textile items? Whether you donate at your local thrift store, a charity or in the bins at a church, school or the neighborhood shopping plaza, it all ends up getting a second life. Where one donates can be a matter of convenience or a choice of causes to support (schools usually receive payment for collected textiles, whereas local charities support jobs, workforce development or other causes). Some prefer the convenience of placing textiles at the curb in specially marked bags, as residents do in municipalities such as Brookline, Somerville and East Longmeadow that have partnered with a private collector. 🌱

Note: Municipalities can earn Recycling Dividend Program points for conducting textile recycling activities. For more information on the annual grant program, visit www.mass.gov/how-to/smrp-recycling-dividends-program.

Textile recycling resources

- **MassDEP's textiles webpage:** www.mass.gov/guides/massdep-textile-recovery
- **Beyond the Bin (directory of drop-off locations for textiles and other materials that can't go in household recycling bins):** recyclesearch.com/profile/ma



**50,000
Mattresses
Recycled
Under MassDEP
Incentive Program**

Last fall, the Massachusetts Department of Environmental Protection announced that more than 50,000 old mattresses and box springs had been recycled through the Mattress Recycling Incentive, a MassDEP grant program that provides funding to cities and towns to aid in the collection, transportation and recycling of difficult-to-manage materials.

"Recycling mattresses and box springs keeps these bulky items out of landfills and incinerators and can save communities significant money in disposal costs," said Energy and Environmental Affairs Secretary Matthew Beaton.

Forty-three municipalities have implemented mattress and box spring recycling programs through the Mattress Recycling Incentive grant, which pays for up to two years of transportation and recycling costs through one of three state-contracted mattress recycling vendors. The grant also covers the cost of a collection container that grantees will use to sustain the recycling program after the term of the grant.

Approximately 85 percent of each mattress and box spring can be diverted from disposal. The wood, metal, foam and fabric from box springs and mattresses can be made into a number of new products, such as carpet padding, particle board and industrial filters. The MassDEP says the Mattress Recycling Incentive program also contributes to the development of a regional recycling economy.

Municipalities interested in implementing mattress recycling programs are invited to apply in the next grant cycle, which opens in April and has an application deadline of June 12. Inquiries about applying for the Mattress Recycling Incentive grant program may be directed to Lydia Meintel-Wade at Lydia.Meintel-Wade@mass.gov.

For more information about mattress recycling, visit www.mass.gov/service-details/mattress-recycling. 🌱