

# **Reducing Textile Waste in Nova Scotia**

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## **Executive Summary**

This essay outlines the impacts of textile waste on our environment and how this can be counteracted, both provincially and individually. It highlights the importance of a circular economy and how citizens can strive towards this. It provides possible provincial solutions to the problem, including implementing recycling mandates, waste disposal bans, incentives for sustainability or Extended Producer Responsibility. It introduces non-profit organizations and associations including NACTR and their place in combating textile waste. It highlights what the individual can do and the impact they can make through donating, thrifting or swapping clothing rather than throwing it out. As well, the positive benefits of repairing and repurposing textiles. This essay explains the importance of education and what the province and the individual can do to combat this. The examples in the essay provide concrete evidence of the success of these actions and show the importance of taking action against textile waste.

## Essay

As our world faces the consequences of climate change, awareness is key to making counteractive change. It is important to consider the impact we have with every daily action, and the waste we unknowingly produce. Specifically, people must critically think about textile waste. Globally, we produce over 92 million tons of textile waste per year (Igini, 2023) - this is approximately 3 tonnes of garbage every second. We have a responsibility on an individual and collective level to work against these scary statistics and change the fate of textiles for the better. Through personal initiatives like reusing, repurposing and repairing clothing, we can individually contribute to a sustainable future. Provincial and municipal projects like recycling mandates, organizations and education can make a true impact. By learning about our effect on textile waste, educating others and changing our actions, we can effectively combat climate change.

Many of the solutions to this issue stem from the idea of the circular economy, which is a model that promotes extending the life cycle of waste by following the principles of reducing, reusing and recycling (European Parliament, 2023). According to *Roadrunner Modern Waste and Recycling*, only 15% of textiles are currently reused. By “closing the loop” and adopting ideas that encourage keeping textiles in the economy for as long as possible, a major environmental impact can be made. This not only protects our environment, but also reduces dependence on raw materials and creates jobs, leading to public appeal.

On a provincial level, the government can work towards a circular usage of textiles through a number of actions. Currently, most of the waste in our community goes directly to landfills and supports the linear economy in which nothing is reused. Last year over 58 000 tonnes of textiles were wasted (Divert, 2023). By implementing additional structure to recycling rules, we can achieve a cleaner economy.

Some solutions are simple and concrete: for example, introducing a recycling mandate. This would require all municipalities to provide textile recycling as a part of their collection

program. Many individual communities have implemented these rules and have been very successful. In the community of Colchester, the government adopted a new recycling program in 2016 that allows for the recycling of textiles through the weekly garbage collection (Colchester, 2016). This program implements the circular economy philosophy by collecting all clothing and sending them to Essex Textiles. From here, they are sorted into fabric that can be reused and ones that are ready to be thrown away/End of Life Textiles (EoLs). There was much positive feedback from the residents of Colchester after being educated about this program through municipal letters and newspapers as well as a free mobile app called Recollect (Chenoweth, 2018). As of 2018, only one other community has taken on this curbside program out of the 15 municipalities that depend on Colchester to process their waste. A provincial mandate would result in better management of the textile waste, which Colchester has clearly shown.

Other provincial initiatives that would reduce waste include disposal bans or incentives for sustainable practices. A disposal ban would allow for a macro transition of individuals that the provincial government has more control over (Chenoweth, 2018). By implementing this, resident compliance of current recycling systems and clothing donations would increase. This would have to be very carefully considered and many stakeholders must be involved in the discussions surrounding this change, but it could be extremely effective. On the other hand, using incentives and positive reinforcement when sustainability and textile recycling is practiced could be equally beneficial. This could mean lowered taxes or monetary rewards for those who recycle, public recognition of companies and businesses that are committed to sustainability and even grants, subsidies or technical support to companies that show interest in recycling and sustainable textile waste management.

Another program that should be considered is known as Extended Producer Responsibility, or EPR, which requires companies to take greater responsibility for the full life cycle of their products. For example, by mandating the business to create better quality and more sustainable clothing, their life span will increase and therefore waste will be reduced

(Chenoweth, 2018). Producers would also be included in the process of collection, reuse and recycling after use. Financial responsibility could also be integrated. This would relieve political responsibility and encourage the circular economy model. EPR has the potential to be very successful, and was extremely effective in the EU after its implementation (*Ellen MacArthur Foundation, 2022*). This system promotes sustainability and shifts this responsibility from provincial power to producers, which is very appealing to both the government and its stakeholders.

Other non-profit organisations and associations can also have an extremely positive effect on textile waste management. For example, the *National Association for Charitable Textile Recycling* (NACTR) is a group dedicated to promoting the diversion of textiles from landfills and education about textile waste (*National Association for Charitable Textile Recycling, 2018*). NACTR was formed in 2018 and is responsible for diverting 94 500 tonnes of textile waste every year from landfills. These groups are in need of support, both provincial and individually in order to continue to achieve this level of sustainability.

On a personal level, implementing actions into our daily life that require us to actively consider our waste footprint and exercise circular philosophies, change *can* be made. Some actions are as simple as they are effective. By following the “three R’s” model - reduce, reuse, recycle - a large amount of personal textile waste can be diverted.

For example, rather than disposing of clothing, it can be donated to local thrift stores or clothing donation bins. In Truro, there are many thrift stores as well as donation boxes from *Diabetes Canada*, who is a NACTR member. This extends the life of clothing that an individual is done with by handing it off to a new member (Miller Waste, 2023). On the reverse side of this, people can shop at these thrift stores and get their clothing second-hand, furthering the circular economy model. Other ways to achieve a circular participation in textile waste includes receiving hand me downs or hosting clothing swaps, where people bring clothes they are done with in order to swap them with someone else. Some companies have been creative: the Truro

Brewing Company has a “trading trove” in which people can bring old textiles to leave there and swap them with new ones.

Another impactful way to reduce textile waste is through repairing clothing. There are many initiatives that allow for clothing to be re sewn, repaired or repurposed that are effectively increasing the lifespan of clothing. For example, hosting an event in which people can get their clothing stitched back together and buttons replaced will reduce people’s desire to buy new clothing or throw out their current clothes. “Ragging” can also be practiced, which is the process of turning used clothing and fabric into rags by cutting them into smaller pieces. (Similarly, “threads to shreds” is the process of taking old fabric and recycling it to make shreds that can eventually be turned into new clothing (Whale, 2021). All of these actions can be taken towards a circular economy and the promotion of reusing textiles.

Despite all of this being a step in the right direction, the most important part of this is that this information and initiatives reach the public. The truth is, if information is not accessible and easily digestible for the public, it will not be received. Education is key to the success of any of this as the impact of awareness is different to anything else. People may be willing to make changes in their daily lives, but if they do not have access to information about how they can change, it is impossible.

In order to educate people, municipalities and communities can use standardized messaging in order to give access to this information (Chenoweth, 2018). When a new initiative is undertaken by the government, they have a responsibility to let citizens know about it and how they can contribute to the cause. Furthermore, creating focus groups and collaborating with stakeholders and citizens can allow for open communication and true change to be made. In the world of social media, online communities and publicity is equally if not more important in order to also inspire and educate the younger generations. By making information accessible in as many ways as possible, change can be made.

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