



ENDS Report 392, September 2007, p 23
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CLOTHING INDUSTRY COMES UNDER THE SPOTLIGHT

The Environment Department (DEFRA) has met with key players in the fashion, clothing and textile supply chain to develop a “product roadmap” for clothing. It is seeking to obtain firm commitments from the industry to improve its sustainability credentials.

Major firms in the fashion, clothing, and textile supply chain – along with environmental and ethical groups – met for the first time with government on 5 September to consider work to improve the sustainability of clothing throughout its life cycle.

An end-of-life producer responsibility scheme for textiles and systems to improve the traceability of fibres were some suggestions put forward at the meeting at London’s Chatham House, under the eponymous Chatham House rules. It was the government’s first attempt towards a “product roadmap” for the sector.

Product roadmaps are being developed for ten priority areas where government believes that intervention could significantly reduce a broad range of environmental impacts (ENDS Report 391, pp 51-52). Each will aim to capture evidence of impacts across the whole life cycle, develop a “sustainable vision for the future” and chart short, medium and long-term actions to help steer each product towards it.

These will be developed and implemented “gradually and collaboratively” with a wide range of firms and organisations across the supply chain and civil society. Commitment from all will be crucial for success, DEFRA said.

Clothing was chosen following an EU study that showed four product groups accounted for 70-80% of all environmental impacts and 60% of consumer expenditure. Clothing accounted for 5-10% of impacts.¹ Opening proceedings, Junior Environment Minister Joan Ruddock said that the challenge was over whether the clothing industry could develop a sustainable business model.

According to DEFRA, UK clothing and textile impacts in 2006 included at least 1.5-2 million tonnes of waste, 3.1 million tonnes of CO₂-equivalent emissions and 70 million tonnes of wastewater.

Current evidence suggests that significant impacts include:

- Energy use for washing and drying clothes
- Energy use for processing fossil fuels into synthetic fibres

- Water use and toxicity from fertilizers, pesticides and herbicides during non-organic cotton production
- Water use, toxicity, hazardous waste and effluent associated with chemical treatments, dyes and finishes


These effects are amplified by the rapid growth in discount and “fast fashion”, where products have shorter lifetimes. This now accounts for one fifth of the UK market, double its share in 1999.

In nearly ten years, consumer spending on clothing has soared by 34% with consumption reaching around 2 million tonnes a year, worth £23 billion.

Delegates tried to pinpoint steps in the supply chain where intervention was needed. Many highlighted a low reuse and recycling rate of textiles, saying it was a missed resource efficiency opportunity and suggested a producer responsibility scheme for textiles.

The lack of transparency and traceability of raw fibres was also identified as a key issue. Firms said this made it difficult for retailers and brand owners to work with suppliers to improve environmental performance.

DEFRA indicated that it intends to consider these suggestions. Other issues it will look at include the role of sustainable design and emerging technologies, the use of alternative man-made and natural fibres without the intensive impacts of cotton and polyester, and options to close the loop with remanufacturing, and reuse and recycling along with consumer education campaigns.

The clothing and fashion industry will be invited to get involved with developing the roadmap further. While the form this will take is being decided, officials are considering a similar approach to that taken for the food industry sustainability strategy (ENDS Report 376, p 8 ) , with meetings focused on specific intervention areas.

A key issue for DEFRA will be to engage with some key retail chains and brand owners that were notable by their absence. Among those who failed to attend were Primark, the Arcadia Group, Oasis, River Island and Monsoon.

Ms Ruddock said she wanted firm commitments from the industry, but added that the outcome of the exercise could not be predicted: “Nothing has been ruled in, nothing ruled out. We really are at the very beginning of the process and only just starting to understand the fundamental issues.”

Further information

- Environmental impact of products: analysis of life cycle environmental. European Commission Joint Research Centre (http://ec.europa.eu/environment/ipp/pdf/eipro_report.pdf)
- Environmental impact of products: analysis of life cycle environmental, Annex. European Commission Joint Research Centre (http://ec.europa.eu/environment/ipp/pdf/eipro_annex.pdf)

- Environmental impact of products: analysis of life cycle environmental, Summary Report. European Commission Joint Research Centre (http://ec.europa.eu/environment/ipp/pdf/eipro_summary.pdf)
 - Defra page on Environmental impacts - priority products - clothing roadmap (<http://www.defra.gov.uk/environment/consumerprod/products/clothing.htm>)
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