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SUSTAINABILITY

Sustainable fashion looks forward to the Biden era

BY RACHEL CERNANSKY

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Brand executives, analysts and industry experts share their policy wish lists in the US to reform the fashion industry at a faster rate.



On their own, brands can make efforts to be more sustainable, more ethical and more responsible. But it will never be enough to bring the fashion industry's environmental footprint within science-based recommendations or to ensure adequate wages and working conditions for its millions of workers, argue supply chain experts, environmental and labour advocates, as well as some brand executives. Ultimately, they say, the only thing that can achieve that is legislation.

"We absolutely need governments to create more policies to make the apparel industry more sustainable, and beyond sustainable to regenerative. There's almost nothing out there that requires that," says Cara Chacon, who heads Patagonia's social and environmental responsibility team. "There's many things the government can do to help even the playing field, but also get us to a more sustainable place."

While businesses focused on sustainability are often swimming against the tide, government policies have the potential to reward companies for raising their standards. Until every company is legally required to not only take the same steps as one another, the playing field will never be level, Kate Larsen, a former Burberry executive and founder of social enterprise advisory SupplyEsChange told *Vogue Business* earlier this year. The United States, with a change in governance on the horizon, could have an opportunity to push a robust and transformative legislative agenda. As of now, there's little precedent for industry-wide policy mandates focused on waste, climate change or people's livelihoods. For the most part, businesses are entrusted to voluntarily do the right thing, or to respond to consumers demanding they do.

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Fashion's supply chain: More scrutiny to come

BY ANNACHIARA BIONDI



In the fashion sector, there are urgent policy gaps that a new administration would need to address to make sustainable supply chains and business models a reality. Ensuring decent wages for garment workers, including a living hourly wage rather than piece-rate payment — a key component of legislation proposed in California last summer — would be a good start, but there are opportunities throughout the supply chain where regulations could raise standards for workers, for consumers and the general public, and the planet as a whole.

We asked industry experts to detail their ideal policies to understand what's needed for the industry to be able to get from where it is to where it needs to be.

Agriculture

Raw materials are responsible for the majority of a garment's environmental footprint — which means that policies to incentivise more sustainable materials should begin at the farm level, where natural fibres are sourced.

Traci Bruckner, policy director at Sustainable Agriculture and Food Systems Funders, says the next Farm Bill — which essentially dictates what US agriculture looks like every five years — needs to stop focusing just on what farmers grow and start addressing how farmers grow it. For example, if the Farm Bill encourages [conservation-based farming](#), she says, then “it is actually supporting the way the farmers care for the land”. Likewise, if and when the US gets around to a climate bill, she would want to see it reward [farming practices that store](#) rather than emit greenhouse gases.

By incentivising growers of fibres like cotton and wool to shift their practices, these kinds of policies can make it easier — and more cost-effective — for fashion brands to source materials that are lower impact, and ultimately to meet their own climate goals.

Renewable energy transition, cleaner supply chain

Among scientists, there's little debate that the most urgent need from a climate and energy perspective is to shift away from fossil fuels and towards clean, renewable energy.

“Fashion brands and other companies who have set 100 per cent renewable energy or equivalent targets for their own operations know they cannot achieve these goals in a meaningful way on their own,” says Gary Cook, global climate campaigns director for the advocacy group Stand.earth. He wants to see the Biden administration drive investments in infrastructure for renewables, end construction for expanded fossil fuel use and explore options under existing legislative frameworks, such as the Dodd-Frank Act, to require asset managers and institutional investors to address climate risk in their portfolios.

Advocacy group Stand.earth hopes Biden will drive investment for renewable energy.
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Shipping is another [major source](#) of emissions and an area where Cook wants to see urgent action — particularly because ocean shipping and aviation are both not addressed by the Paris Agreement. Considering how much apparel arrives via cargo ship, he says, “fashion brands have an important opportunity and responsibility to help catalyse not only investment in zero emissions vessels by carriers, but also support policies that will decarbonise the sector across the board”.

He also expects to see an increase in policies, from governments and other institutions, supporting decarbonisation of the supply chain by mandating cleaner energy in contracts — as California has done through its “Buy Clean” legislation. Government procurement could have broader applications as well, for example to require the use of organic cotton or elimination of certain chemicals in uniforms or other clothes purchased with government funding.

From chemicals to lobbying: Greater transparency

Fashion's supply chains are so fragmented, critics say it's been too easy for brands to distance themselves from problems like labour violations that are often hidden from the end consumer. That's the premise behind the [push for brands to disclose their suppliers](#) — but there's a lot more to how brands operate that experts say needs more sunlight.

Toxic chemicals, for example, are ubiquitous in clothing but there's little or no way for the consumer — or, often, even the brand — to know about them. Martin Mulvihill, chemist and founding partner at venture capital firm Safer Made, would like to see companies be required to disclose every chemical added to any garment, shoe or accessory. That would benefit consumers who want to make more informed choices, he says, and can ultimately force companies to stop using certain substances.

It could also drive the market for safer alternatives. "Right now, a brand can maintain silence or it can advertise it's doing the right thing but it never has to disclose when it's done the [wrong] thing," says Greg Altman, founder of Evolved By Nature, a company using activated silk to replace various toxic substances traditionally used on textiles. "That puts us at a competitive disadvantage. It only works for brands to compete with others if everybody was forced to disclose what is being used."

More broadly, Ayesha Barenblat, founder of the nonprofit Remake, says companies should be required to disclose their lobbying efforts. That would shed light on the issues they prioritise in practice, as opposed to in their marketing messaging. "The same brands who profess sustainability values use their political leverage to erase labour rights and protections in the law," she says.

End of life

Jess Daniels, Fibershed communications and affiliate programming director, says we need policies to reinforce the mindset that old textiles are not necessarily waste. Just as municipal compost has become a reality in many regions, she says discarded textiles can be repurposed at scale as well. "Brands and policymakers alike need to take action to create the infrastructure and effortless user experience to cycle textiles toward circularity."

To make this happen, many experts agree what's needed is Extended Producer Responsibility: policies that hold companies responsible for the impacts and disposal of the products they make.

Shona Quinn, director of social consciousness for Eileen Fisher, says the brand's take-back programme is a form of Extended Producer Responsibility. "Customers send used clothing back to Eileen Fisher, and we sort, clean, mend and resell these products," she says. "It would be helpful if there was a tax incentive for companies that engage in reuse programmes since the product is being diverted from the waste stream and instead given a second life."

Regardless of where clothes end up after use, they send microfibres and chemical pollution to the world's waterways at every stage of their life.

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That would be a significant shift compared to the current model, which Chloe Songer, co-founder of footwear brand Thousand Fell, says encourages the exact wrong behaviour. "The current system incentivises companies to incinerate products or send them to landfill — and the donation market disproportionately impacts third world countries," she says. Chacon says increasing circularity can also be used to stimulate economic growth in communities that most need it. "We need manufacturing infrastructure here in the US to take those discarded clothes, be able to chop them into new yarn and be able to turn them into new products," she says. "Wouldn't that be cool to bring jobs back to the US, to those small rural towns that are losing manufacturing?"

Marissa Nuncio, director of the Los Angeles-based Garment Worker Center,

emphasises the need to improve standards for US workers before assuming that more jobs will ultimately be good news. “The return of manufacturing to the US, including in apparel, would help many communities but only if workers’ wages are able to support them and their families,” she says, describing the federal minimum wage — \$7.55 per hour, since 2009 — as a poverty wage. Immigration reform is urgently needed as well, she says, for any hope of ending the exploitation her organisation advocates against, such as 60-hour weeks for \$5 or \$6 an hour and factory infestations with vermin and, in 2020, high rates of Covid-19.

The lack of end-of-life regulations hasn’t stopped some companies, like Patagonia and Eileen Fisher, from launching programmes to reduce their individual impacts, from improving their fibre sourcing to building more circular business models. They say it would be easier to do even more if government policies supported them taking those actions — but more importantly, experts say the industry isn’t adopting similar changes on a large-enough or fast-enough scale.

“We’d like the [government] to support the idea that all companies, all apparel brands, should take responsibility for their products from conception through design to the end of their life,” she says. “This should be a requirement.”

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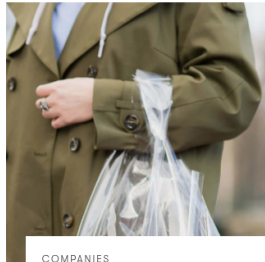
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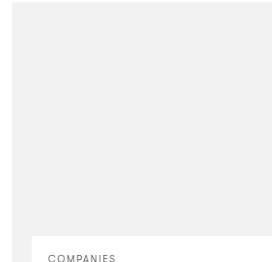
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