Journey of a T-Shirt

BY AMY BLOOMFIELD AND MARISSA D'ANTONI

Have you ever wondered where your old clothes really go?

Whether they are too worn, too small, or just out of style according to ever-changing trend cycles, there are many options to give old garments a second life. Repairing, reusing, or properly recycling even just one T-shirt from our closets can help reduce the impact discarded textiles are having on the environment.

Textile waste is a rapidly growing problem. Over the past two decades, clothing production has shifted into a model of ultra-fast fashion. Worldwide, apparel sales have doubled while the number of times a piece of clothing is worn before it's cast aside has decreased by 36%,* indicating that people are buying more and keeping each item for less time.

Here in New York State, DEC estimates that approximately 1.4 billion pounds of clothing and textiles are disposed of annually. In response, the agency and its research partners are working to better understand and decrease textile waste. While many recommendations support reduction efforts by manufacturers, stores, and municipalities, there are ways individuals can help too. If you own a T-shirt, turn the page to find out how.

*Circular Fibres Initiative analysis based on Euromonitor International Apparel & Footwear 2016 Edition (volume sales trends 2005–2015)

Textile- any type of material made by weaving, knitting, crocheting, or bonding fibers together, including clothing, towels, bedding, and curtains.

Circular Economy- a model of production and consumption that involves sharing, leasing, reusing, repairing, refurbishing, and recycling existing materials and products for as long as possible.

FOLLOW A T-SHIRT ON EACH PATH AND FIND OUT WHICH ONES COMPLETE A CIRCULAR ECONOMY.

OPTION 1

Trash

The T-shirt is thrown away and ends up at a waste disposal facility, such as a landfill, where it can take decades to break down. During this process, the garment can emit methane—a potent greenhouse gas.

Outcome

The T-shirt contributes to climate change, takes up landfill space, and misses an opportunity to be repurposed or clothe another person.

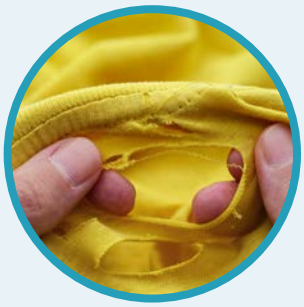
OPTION 2

Repair or Repurpose

SCENARIO A

Repair

The T-shirt has a hole that is easily repairable. It is mended by the owner or taken to a tailor or repair café. Many communities in New York State host repair events where volunteers teach community members how to fix their damaged or broken items free of charge.



SCENARIO B

Repurpose

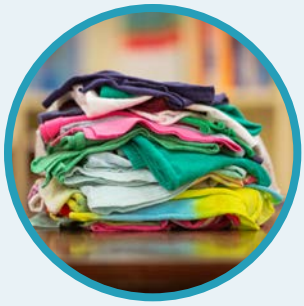
The T-shirt is transformed into something new.

Outcome

The owner learns a new skill and continues to wear the shirt, extending its life and saving the cost of purchasing a new one. ∞

Outcome 1

The T-shirt is upcycled into a tote bag, giving it a second life and keeping it out of the landfill. ∞



Outcome 2

The T-shirt is cut up into rags and reused over and over instead of paper towels, further reducing waste. ∞

OPTION 3

Reuse or Recycle

The T-shirt is dropped off at a local community reuse center that accepts textiles for recycling.

SCENARIO A

Reuse

The T-shirt is still in wearable condition (clean, dry, and odor-free). It is inspected and sorted according to strict hygiene standards and hung on a rack for resale.

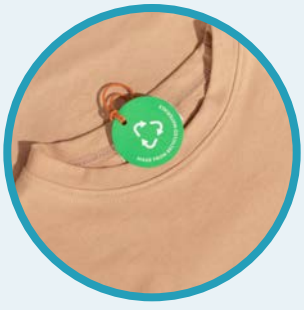
Outcome

The T-shirt finds a second life with a new owner, reducing the need for new clothes and saving the raw materials used in manufacturing them.

SCENARIO B

Recycle

The T-shirt is clean and dry but is torn, stained, and unsuitable for reuse. It is baled and transported to a textiles recycling facility. There, the fabric is shredded down to its fibers, which are then sold to be remanufactured into new garments or fill for things like insulation, seat cushions, and carpet backing.



Outcome

Another consumer purchases a new T-shirt or other items made from the recycled fibers.

Imagine if more T-shirts and other textiles take a circular economy path. It would save natural resources, prevent pollution, reduce greenhouse gas emissions, and prevent disposal of valuable materials. It's also an opportunity to create jobs, more sustainable products, and resilient communities. Businesses, government, organizations, and the public can all work together to help reach New York State's goal of reducing waste by 85% by 2050, one T-shirt at a time.

To support progress in this area, DEC facilitates funding from the Environmental Protection Fund to the State University of New York's College of Environmental Science and Forestry (SUNY-ESF), University at Buffalo, and Stony Brook University for research on and engagement with sustainable materials management in New York State.

FOR MORE INFORMATION ABOUT HOW TO RECYCLE TEXTILES, SCAN THE QR CODE.

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