

Holey Socks, Not in the Trash!

By Claire Sullivan, Executive director, South Shore Recycling Cooperative

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Are you done with those tattered towels? That coffee-stained shirt? Your cast-offs are still too good for the trash!

The average Massachusetts resident throws away about 70 pounds of old clothes, footwear and household “soft-wear” each year. That adds up to around 260,000 tons of used, but useful, textiles that were burned and buried, discovered during audits done at several Massachusetts disposal facilities in 2011. This is 6 percent of all our disposed trash.

There seems to be a widespread misperception that charities and textile recyclers only want “gently used” items that can be resold in thrift shops.

It's time to debunk that myth.

The fact is that even the shaggiest old cloth, leather or stuffed item in your house can be recycled. The only requirements are that they be clean (as in not stinky and gross) and dry.

“We want the public to know all clothing and household textiles, such as tablecloths, sheets, shoes, belts and stuffed animals, can be recycled,” Larry Groipen, past president of the Secondary Materials and Recycled Textiles Association (SMART) and chief of ERC Wiping Products in Lynn, said. “As long as the items are clean, even if they are stained or damaged, there is a recycling use for the material.”

What happens to your castoffs after you drop them in one of those ubiquitous collection boxes?

Whether the box belongs to Bay State Textiles, Goodwill, the Salvation Army, the Red Cross or any of the dozens of other organizations, workers sort them by hand.

The “good stuff” is often sold in local thrift stores, raising money for charities and providing bargain clothing for us and for our neighbors. (You can dress yourself pretty well shopping at Salvation Army Family Stores.)

The thrift store rejects are baled and sent to rag graders to be sorted based on condition, color, quality and material type. Some baled material is exported to developing countries, where impoverished populations depend on low-cost used items to clothe themselves, and for material to make new items. There is a thriving cottage industry in shoe and clothing repair and resale in countries that lack their own natural resources.

Absorbent rags are cut and sold to commercial operations (machine shops, car washes, marinas, etc.) as wiping cloths, which is what Larry's business in Lynn does.

Materials that can't be used as rags are shredded and reprocessed into fibers for furniture stuffing, insulation, soundproofing and carpet padding. Millbury Textiles near Worcester employs dozens of people who do this. Even zippers and buttons are captured and recycled. Shredded polyester is granulated and spun into new fabric.

The centuries-old “rag” business employs hundreds of Massachusetts workers, supports training programs to help struggling citizens develop work skills, and adds value to materials that would otherwise be wasted. Proceeds from the sale of all the grades of textiles cover collection and processing costs, and often provide funding for charitable causes, local organizations, schools and municipalities.

Paul Curry of Bay State Textiles stresses that “when municipalities are informing the public, keep the message simple! Everything should be dry, but we accept the good – gently used clothing, the bad – those ripped jeans with the broken zipper, and the ugly – that sweater Aunt Edna gave you in 1978.”

BST is working with several municipalities to generate revenue for schools and municipal recycling programs.

Getting the most value out of the thrift store out-throws sustains many local businesses.

“This symbiotic relationship between private-sector recyclers, charities and community groups efficiently recycles 80 million pounds of clothing annually in Massachusetts,” Groipen pointed out. “But we have great potential for growth, as this represents only about 15 percent of all textile waste.”

Making new cloth, especially cotton, is a dirty business, sucking up vast quantities of water, petroleum-based fertilizer and pesticides. In fact, up to one-third of a pound of pesticide and 700 gallons of water is consumed to grow and process two shirts-worth of cotton. Reusing old cloth saves money and natural resources by reducing this pollution and water use. Some designers are even creating new pieces of clothing from old scraps.

Keeping valuable material out of the trash and supporting local organizations and businesses are reasons enough to put all of your used clothing, shoes and household textiles in any donation box. For residents who would also like to see the proceeds from recycling their old clothes used to fund charitable causes, or to schedule a pickup at your home, go to www.donationtown.org.

Recycling isn’t just good for our paper, cardboard and containers. We help the planet and the economy by recycling all our textiles, too.