

## HB 1107, relating to environmental impacts of fashion

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### Key Findings

1. Proposed legislation would have Washington state oversee global clothing manufacturing to reduce the impacts of the industry on the environment. Many of the claims included in the legislation, however, are incorrect or misleading.
2. Citing the World Bank, the bill claims 40 percent of clothing in some countries is never used. The World Bank says this is false, calling it a “misquote”.
3. The legislation also claims clothing is discarded more quickly and the average number of times clothing is worn decreased by 36% between 2000 and 2015. However, one country – China – is responsible for this entire trend. Clothing use in the U.S. and Europe is virtually unchanged.
4. Contrary to the claims of the bill, clothing also accounts for a tiny amount of water use. In India, one pair of jeans amount to less than 1 percent of annual renewable freshwater per person. In Brazil, those jeans use just 0.04 percent of per capita renewable freshwater.
5. The amount of greenhouse gas emissions is also small, just 2-8 percent of global GHGs to clothe people across the planet.
6. The legislation would also risks imposing environmental colonialism because it would attempt to override the decisions of democratically elected governments in India, Brazil and elsewhere, imposing our standards on them without their choice..
7. With the challenges of governing a global industry and overriding the decisions of people in other countries,

**and so many errors in the intent section, the bill is likely to do more harm than good to workers and the planet.**

### Introduction

Are your jeans destroying the planet and leaving people without drinking water? That’s the premise of House Bill 1107, the “Washington fashion sustainability accountability act.” The bill would give the Washington State Department of Ecology oversight to monitor and address the production of global clothing, footwear, and textiles. The legislation notes that “the fashion industry has many negative environmental impacts, including high levels of water use, runoff pollution from the use of agrochemicals and dyes, carbon emissions, industry waste, and hazardous work environments.”

However, some of the claims used to justify the legislation are contradicted by the same sources cited in the legislation. Other claims are exaggerated or meaningless. Additionally, the law would not solve the impacts cited in the bill. It is also questionable whether Department of Ecology staff are capable of accurately collecting the information required in the legislation.

Perhaps most importantly are the overtones of environmental colonialism. Why does the Washington State Legislature believe it can – or should – override the decisions of democratically elected governments in countries like Brazil and India on how to balance the need for jobs, environmental protection, and economic growth in their countries? The fact that this legislation can’t accurately describe the impacts from clothing is a clear indication the state should focus on solving Washington state’s many environmental challenges before trying to intervene elsewhere to impact the lives of people without their input.

## Does fashion harm the environment?

The sponsors of HB 1107 say the goal of the legislation is “for Washington to serve as a leader in mitigating the environmental impact of the fashion industry.” Section 1 of the proposed legislation outlines some of the environmental harms the sponsors claim are caused by global production of clothing. In the following, we’ll first lay out what harms the legislation claims to be addressing and fact check those claims, using many of the same sources cited in the legislation.

In section 1, the legislation claims clothing production is excessive and wasteful, with many garments going underused or unused. Section 1(3) of the law claims, “according to the world bank, 40 percent of clothing purchased in some countries is never used.” It also says that “the average number of times a piece of clothing is worn decreased by 36 percent between 2000 and 2015.”

This waste, they claim, has a serious impact on the supply of drinking water. The bill claims, “The United Nations estimates that a single pair of jeans requires a kilogram of cotton, and because cotton tends to be grown in dry environments, producing this kilogram requires about 7,500 to 10,000 liters of water, which is approximately 10 years’ worth of drinking water for one person.”

The production of clothing also has an impact on climate change, accounting for “about eight to 10 percent of global carbon emissions, more than both aviation and shipping combined.”

To address these environmental impacts, the bill requires disclosure of a range of environmental metrics by clothing manufacturers to help the state determine how to reduce those impacts, imposing penalties for companies that fail to disclose the information.

## Much of the claimed environmental harm is either false or misleading

The primary justification for Washington state to take action on a global issue is that the environmental damage from clothing production is so significant that it must be

addressed. Many of the claims made in the legislation, however, are false or misleading.

For example, one of the most dramatic claims is contradicted by the same source cited in the bill.

The legislation claims the World Bank found that in some countries 40 percent of clothing is never worn. That would be a remarkable amount of waste. But it isn’t true. The source of that claim appears to be [an article on the BBC website](#) which links to the World Bank. The [World Bank page](#), however, does not make that claim. I emailed the World Bank to ask for the source of this claim. They said the claim is “a misquote” and said they would ask the BBC to correct the error.

That erroneous BBC site also appears to be the source for a number of the claims in the legislation. That same BBC page includes the claim – repeated in the legislation – that “the average number of times a piece of clothing is worn decreased by 36% between 2000 and 2015.” That statistic is due to one country: China.

This claim comes from [page 77 of this study](#) from the Ellen MacArthur Foundation. The study shows that during the period between 2000 and 2015, the average number of times a piece of clothing was worn was virtually unchanged in both the United States and 28 members of the European Union. By way of contrast, the average number of times a garment was worn in China fell by 70 percent. Just one country is driving virtually all of this trend. A solution that doesn’t address how residents of China buy clothing does nothing to change this trend.

The bill also highlights the amount that ends up in landfills as a reason to regulate the global clothing industry. The legislation claims that “The United States environmental protection agency estimates that in 2018, 11,300,000 tons of textiles ended up in landfills.” Not all of that is clothing. [The EPA data includes](#) furniture, carpet, tires, footwear, sheets and towels in the category of “textiles.” The [EPA reports](#) that clothing and footwear account for just over 9 million tons. To put that in context, the [EPA reports](#) that a total of 292.4 million tons of MSW was created in 2018, of which 146 million tons were landfilled. Clothing represents only 3% of all municipal solid waste and 6% of waste in landfills.

Even if people consider these low amounts excessive, there is still no mechanism in the legislation to increase the number of times individual garments are worn or reduce the amount that ultimately ends up in a landfill.

The legislation also repeats another claim from that BBC article, claiming that “producing this kilogram requires about 7,500 to 10,000 liters of water, which is approximately 10 years’ worth of drinking water for one person.” There are several problems with this claim.

First, it is exaggerated. According to the United Nations, the actual amount is about 7 years, not 10. The [U.N.’s Alliance for Sustainable Fashion notes](#), “It takes around 7,500 litres of water to make a single pair of jeans, equivalent to the amount of water the average person drinks over a period of seven years.”

Another problem is the insinuation that the use of this water means there isn’t enough drinking water in countries that grow cotton for clothing or in countries where clothing is manufactured. The data show this is not correct. Seven years worth of drinking water sounds like a lot, but it is actually a tiny percentage of renewable fresh water in cotton-growing countries.

[According to](#) the UN Food and Agriculture Organization, the average person in India (the world’s top cotton producer) has access to more than 1 million liters annual of “renewable freshwater.” The 7,500 liters to make one pair of jeans amounts to just 0.75% of average renewable freshwater per person. In Brazil, the fourth largest producer of cotton, the average person has access to 26.5 million liters of renewable freshwater. A pair of jeans represents 0.04% (4/100ths of a percent) of per capita renewable freshwater. The other top two producers are U.S. and China. People in the U.S. are not suffering from a shortage of drinking water. Fashion is not taking water from people’s drinking water in the major cotton-growing countries.

By way of comparison, [the same amount of water](#) is used to produce 4 pounds of cheese and 5 pounds of nuts, which don’t last as long as a pair of jeans. Should the Washington State Legislature require cheesemakers to report their water use?

Similarly, the claims about the impact of the fashion industry on global greenhouse gas emissions is exaggerated.

The legislation claims that “the fashion industry accounts for about eight to 10 percent of global carbon emissions.” The UN Fashion alliance [says this is not accurate](#), claiming that clothing is “responsible for an estimated 2-8% of the world’s greenhouse gas emissions,” not 8 to 10 percent. Additionally, contrary to the claims of the legislation, clothing-related greenhouse gas emissions are a fraction of those from aviation and shipping. [According to Climate Watch](#), aviation and shipping account for about 20 percent of global emissions. Even if we use the high end for clothing-related emissions, aviation and shipping are more than double the amount from clothing.

The legislation also claims – again from the BBC story – that “Around 70,000,000 barrels of oil a year are used to make polyester fibers in our clothes, from waterproof jackets to scarves.” While that amount sounds large, it is relatively small, amounting to less than one day’s worth of oil used globally. In 2025, [the International Energy Agency projects](#) global oil production to be 104.8 million barrels per day. The oil for all polyester clothing for 2025 was supplied by 4 pm on January 1.

It shouldn’t be surprising that clothing billions of people around the world uses resources like water and energy. However, the claims made in Section 1 of the legislation are consistently exaggerated, misleading or inaccurate. If legislators want to make an argument that the impact of clothing production is excessive, they need to begin with accurate information.

## **The costs of needless regulation**

Wasteful regulation like this has a cost, both directly to taxpayers in Washington and indirectly to the planet and people who have no say in how this law impacts their lives.

The [fiscal note](#) for the legislation indicates a cost of \$1.3 million for the first biennium. That amount of money could be invested in projects that reduce 130,000 metric tons of CO<sub>2</sub>, or the equivalent of the emissions from more than 30,000 cars for one year. By way of contrast, because the law doesn’t include any tangible policies, the benefits are purely theoretical.

Politicians proposing this legislation of should be careful they aren't promoting environmental colonialism – making ourselves feel better while hurting people who have jobs making clothing or who need durable, low-cost clothing. India and Brazil have democratically elected governments. Why are we in Olympia telling them the people of those countries that they voted wrong? Let people in the countries where cotton is grown and textiles are produced make the decisions about the tradeoffs impacting their lives.

Additionally, the U.N. is working on this. Why do legislators believe the Department of Ecology do what the U.N. cannot?

## **Conclusion**

Sponsors of HB 1107 argue they want to reduce the environmental and human impact of clothing production around the world. Effectively governing a global industry from Olympia, however, is more likely to do unintentional harm because it is simply not possible for a few agency staff to monitor the impacts of a global industry and then make thoughtful recommendations about controlling that industry in countries as diverse as Brazil and China. The fact that some of the claims made in the bill itself are false should be a warning that trying to make thoughtful decisions would be impossible.

Washington state is failing to meet its own climate and environmental goals. Until the state has its own house in order, it is best to focus our resources here.

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