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A New California Bill Would Require Label With Polyester Pollution Warning

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A bill recently introduced in the California State Assembly would require all clothing made from fabric that is more than 50 percent polyester to bear a conspicuous label warning that the garment sheds plastic microfibers when machine washed, so instead the label would recommend hand washing.

If the bill passes, the sale or offering for sale of clothing without this label would be prohibited as of Jan. 1, 2020. Hats and shoes would be exempt.

According to the bill, garments made from synthetic fibers such as polyester can shed up to 1,900 microfibers per wash. Since these fibers “are small enough to get past filters, they’re ending up in waterways and the ocean,” said a statement from a bill sponsor, Assemblyman

Richard Bloom (D., Santa Monica).

“Plastic microfibers are making their way from washing machines into our seafood and even into the water we drink,” Bloom said.

He cited research from the University of California, Davis that sampled fish and shellfish sold at local California fish markets and found 25 percent of fish and a third of shellfish contained plastic debris, with the majority of that plastic debris being microfibers.

The United Nations has warned about the impact of microplastics, which the Hohenstein Institute notes has generally been defined as particles under 5 millimeters in length that are showing up in the world’s waterways. According to Jan Beringer, head of research and development for Hohenstein’s Department of Function and Care, microplastics have the potential to poison the food chain, as these tiny beads of plastic have been found in the stomachs of marine life, as well as the supply of drinking water.

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The Hohenstein Institute has embarked on a study aimed at reducing the discharge of microplastics into wastewater, leading to harmful health effects on animals and humans.

Hohenstein is applying proprietary technology and testing methods to thoroughly analyze microplastics in industrial laundry effluents. In addition to defining the state of the problem, the test will also explore the washing process for opportunities to minimize microplastics emissions.

The Ellen MacArthur Foundation’s 2014 report on the future of plastics estimated that the world’s oceans will contain more plastic than fish by 2050.

The California bill is meant to be in line with other efforts in the state aimed at reducing water pollution, including a ban on personal care products containing plastic microbeads, which Bloom said “was eventually applied nationally...through federal legislation signed by President Obama.”

Other California efforts include standardized compostability labeling, a requirement for polystyrene packaging to be recycled, and Proposition 65, the Safe Drinking Water and Toxic Enforcement Act of 1986. California has long been at the forefront of environmental measures, from air pollution regulations to chemical standards in products

The California Fashion Association registered its opposition to the bill, warning that, like Prop 65 (designed to help Californians make informed decisions about the impacts of chemicals known to cause cancer, birth defects or other reproductive harm), it could result in a “raft of phony ‘class action’ lawsuits” against businesses.