

Regional Forum on Sustainable Development

UN Forum says Fashion Industry an Environmental Emergency

05/03/2018

<http://wwd.com/business-news/financial/un-forum-fashion-industry-an-environmental-emergency-1202615776/>

The global fast fashion industry — annually worth \$3 trillion — **is clearly “an environmental emergency,” warned top United Nations officials and industry experts** at a forum here, as they stressed the sector’s widespread adverse environmental and health implications.

“It is clear that the fashion industry needs to change gears. It needs to become environmentally sound,” Olga Algayerova, executive secretary of the U.N. Economic Commission for Europe told delegates attending the event, titled “Fashion and the Sustainable Development Goals: What Role for the U.N.?”

As the majority of fashion consumers live in North America and Europe, taking the lead, she said, in **“promoting sustainable consumption becomes an imperative to address the many emergencies created by fast fashion.”**

The Geneva-based UNECE consists of 56 member states, which includes the U.S.

The fashion industry is the world’s second-biggest user of water and produces 20 percent of global wastewater, said Algayerova, adding that it also produces around 10 percent of global carbon emissions — more than all international flights and maritime shipping combined.

Birgit Lia Altmann, a UNECE analyst, told participants it requires more than 10,000 liters of water to produce 1 kilo of cotton, just enough to produce one pair of blue jeans, or the same amount of water a person drinks in 10 years.

In addition, cotton farming, she noted, also accounts for one-quarter of all insecticides and 11 percent of pesticides used worldwide.

Moreover, half a million metric tons of plastic microfibers shed during the washing of plastic based textiles, such as polyester and nylon, end up in oceans, while about 85 percent of textiles end up in landfills or are incinerated.

Altmann said in the present era of fast fashion, there are now up to 52 micro-seasons, consumers buy more items of apparel compared to 2000, but each garment is kept half as long and on average 40 percent are never worn.

Michael Stanley-Jones, program management officer at the U.N. Environment Agency, and **in dialogue with industry brands, said the fashion industry “sees it’s far behind in sustainability and is asking for solutions to become more sustainable.”**

“Everyone wants to look good, feel good and do the right thing for the environment,” he said.

The UNEP official said SDG 12 — sustainable production and consumption — is at the heart of the issue. It calls for promoting resource and energy efficiency and sustainable infrastructure, among other actions.

The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, adopted by world leaders in September 2015, includes 17 SDGs that cover a range of social and economic development goals. This includes SDG 3 on good health; SDG 6 on clean water and sanitation; SDG 7 on affordable and clean energy; SDG 8 on decent work; SDG 9 on innovation, and SDG 13 on climate action.

Paolo Naldini, director of Cittadellarte, Fashion BEST, or Bio Ethical Sustainable Trend, in Italy, said there is a need for a paradigm shift in the way we think and approach the industry and argued fashion has the **“symbolic power to advocate for sustainability.”**

He said consumers need to be aware of the environmental, health and social risks of the textiles value chain, and pointed out logo brand members of the National Chamber of Italian fashion have agreed to engage in a sustainability and traceability program of the whole textile supply chain, with 450 chemicals listed.

But U.N. experts such as Niclas Svenningsen, manager of strategy and relationships at the U.N. Framework Convention on Climate Change, noted that in the past the focus on greenhouse gases had been mainly on energy production, transportation and agriculture, and there had not been much engagement with the fashion industry.

UNECE analysts also said that while 90 percent of apparel is shipped by containers, shipping only accounts for 4 percent of emissions of the clothing carbon cycle. They added that 70 percent comes from production, with the main reason being the alternative to cotton — synthetic fibers, which are based on energy-intensive oil — and a further 22 percent comes from consumers making buying trips.

The warning by the U.N. comes at the same time as a joint report by Quantis and the ClimateWorks Foundation, titled **“Measuring Fashion,”** which found that **“combined, the global apparel and footwear industries account for 8 percent of the world’s greenhouse gas emissions, almost as much as the total carbon impact of the EU.”**

The apparel industry alone, it noted, accounts for **6.7 percent of the world’s greenhouse gas emissions**, with more than 50 percent coming from three phases: fiber production (15 percent), yarn preparation (28 percent), and the highest impact phase, dyeing and finishing (36 percent).

“As we face urgent environmental and social challenges caused by climate change and resource depletion, the efficacy of solutions will depend on the creativity, innovation and boldness so characteristic of the fashion industry. It’s time for players to change the trajectory,” the joint study concluded.