

RECOGNISING CIRCULAR TEXTILES

What & How



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INTRODUCTION

Fabrics and products made from recycled textiles are what we refer to as “circular textiles”. But how can you recognise circular textiles when shopping for the most sustainable products? It’s not always easy to tell how sustainable or circular a specific textile product is—even for the experts. Luckily, you can sometimes find labels on textile products that can help you make the most sustainable decision.

CONTENT LABELS

All textile products sold in the EU must include a composition label, which lists the fibre composition of the textile product. Most of the time, the country of origin and the wash and care instructions are also included. These labels often list the use of recycled fibres (a requirement for circular textiles), but recycled content does not have to be mentioned (i.e. you can list “cotton” instead of “recycled cotton” on the label). Thus, while content labels might indicate whether or not a product is made from circular textiles, you have to look very carefully.

COMPANY LABELS

Sometimes brands have sustainable product lines, like the H&M Conscious Collection. The products in this line are made with at least 50% sustainable fibres. In the case of recycled cotton, 20% is considered enough to make it into the Conscious Collection. This collection is more sustainable than their standard product lines and is helping H&M improve their environmental profile. However, there is still a lot of room for criticism as H&M are encouraging customers to buy more instead of buying fewer, higher quality items. A critical review of H&M can be [read here](#).

There are also smaller, inherently sustainable and circular brands in today’s market. Two examples of sustainable, circular brands are [Mud Jeans](#) and Loop-a-life. When you buy brands like this, you are guaranteed to be buying circular products.

Mud Jeans has a leasing system in place for their jeans. In this system, they own the materials the jeans are made from, so the jeans are returned to Mud Jeans when they are discarded. Currently, up to 40% of recycled cotton is used in the composition of their jeans. They are planning to produce jeans made from 100% recycled cotton using both mechanically and chemically recycled cotton.

Amsterdam-based Loop-a-life is another brand only selling textile products containing a high percentage of recycled content. They also control large parts of their production chain. Part of the materials they use come directly from a textile sorting centre near Amsterdam where the materials are sorted based on fibres and colours. Wool is their preferred material, but productions containing recycled cotton also make up part of the collection. Production occurs mostly in Southern Europe, while sales happen in The Netherlands.

WHAT'S IN A BRAND?

RANKING BASED ON ETHICS & SUSTAINABILITY

The sustainability of many brands is ranked by an entity known as [Good On You](#). Their system ranks brands not only on sustainability and circularity, but also on ethical aspects. You can check out their list of the most sustainable brands in Europe [here](#).

Although the highest ranking brands usually sell their products for higher prices, it is useful to know which ones rank near the top of sustainable fashion lists like these. High-ranking brands usually charge higher prices because they produce on a much smaller scale, use more expensive materials, and pay their workers a decent salary.

GRS AND RCS

Global Recycled Standard (GRS) and Recycled Claim Standard (RCS) are labels issued by [Textile Exchange](#) to indicate recycled content in products. Textile Exchange has set a number of criteria which must be fulfilled in order to be allowed to use these labels.

Companies using these labels have to prove the origin of the recycled fibres and the amount of recycled fibres in their products. A minimum of 20% recycled content must be present in the intermediate products, and only products with more than 50% may use the GRS logo on the label. Aside from recycled content, GRS also demands proof that the production is not harmful to people and the environment. You can read all of the requirements listed in the full document [here](#).

The Recycled Claim Standard is an international, voluntary standard that sets requirements for third-party certification of the recycled input and chain of custody. The goal of the RCS is to increase the use of Recycled materials. The objectives of the RCS are:

- Alignment of recycled definitions across multiple applications.
- Track and trace recycled input materials.
- Provide consumers (both brands and end consumers) with a tool to make informed decisions.
- Provide assurance that materials in a final product are actually recycled.

The Recycled Claim Standard is intended for use with any product that contains at least 5% recycled materials. Each stage of production is required to be certified, beginning at the recycling stage and ending at the last seller in the final business-to-business transaction.

REMOKEY

REMO (REcycle MOVement) has a track and trace system for recycled textile content in place. Companies can [join REMO](#) to show that they are using recycled content in their products and that they are transparent regarding the supply chain. REMO calculates and quantifies the environmental benefits of using recycled fibres instead of virgin fibres.

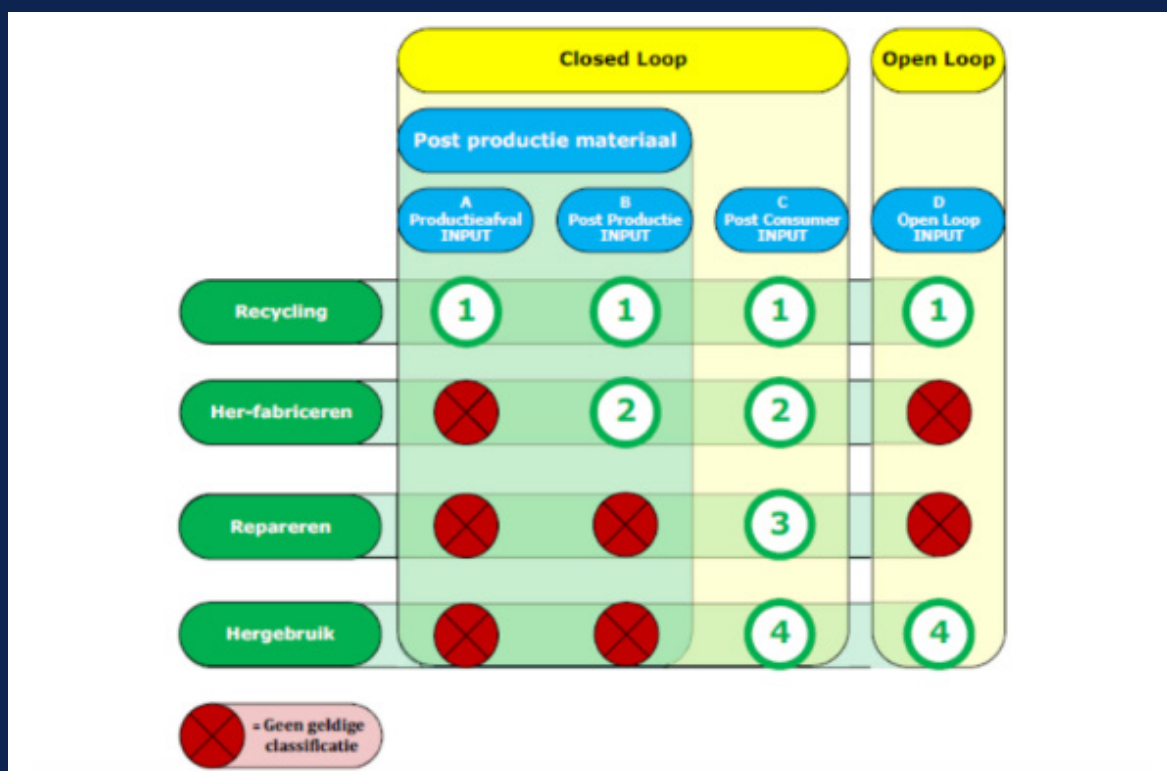
An important aspect of REMO is that they provide an internet landing page. This landing page greatly helps companies to communicate their use of recycled fibres and the environmental savings accompanying the use of these fibres.

REMO not only has a large client base in countries well known for their circular textile industry (like Italy and Spain), but also has a [number of clients](#) in the Netherlands and Belgium. Information about a product can be easily retrieved by scanning the QR-code on the label of REMOkey products.

DUTCH NTA ON CIRCULAR TEXTILES

The Dutch standardisation organisation NEN has recently issued a Dutch Technical Agreement (NTA) on Circular Textiles. This agreement outlines when a textile product may be referred to as circular. In this agreement four categories are distinguished: post-consumer recycled materials, pre-consumer products (unsold/unwanted by customers and therefore refurbished or recycled), recycled industrial waste, and recycled materials from other production chains (like PET from packaging). This NTA will be completed with test methods to prove the circularity of the product, and will be available by the end of 2021.

The NTA Circular textiles scheme is shown in the figure below.





Above: Buyers beware! Many labels are issued by the companies themselves as a marketing device and are not checked by third parties. Be skeptical of marketing messages while shopping. Are the brand's claims backed up by evidence? Photo by Laurie Skelton.

OTHER LABELS

There are a number of other labels meant to make you believe the product has been produced in a way that saves the planet and helps the workers.

Many of those labels, however, are issued by the companies themselves as a marketing device, and the validity of their claims is often not checked by third parties. Therefore, the value of these labels is low, if they have any value at all.

There are also labels that look at the welfare of the workers in the textile and clothing supply chain, but the description of these labels is beyond the scope of this chapter.

If you want more information on such labels you can check out the [Eco Label Index](#).

REFERENCES

Recycled Claim Standard (RCS). (n.d.) Retrieved June 2020 from <https://www.gcl-intl.com/certification/recycled-claim-standard-rcs/>

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OF RESPONDENTS* SAID
SUSTAINABILITY
IS AN IMPORTANT
FACTOR WHEN
BUYING CLOTHING

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