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Thirst for change: Securing a water positive future

Food and Retail Sector
Overview



Retail water use is estimated to account for nearly a fifth of public water supplies globally¹, whilst agriculture – the source of our food supply – accounts for 69%².

Fashion

Fashion is a huge consumer of water. It is used across the supply chain for everything from irrigating cotton to domestic washing of clothes³. Fast fashion is a key contributor, although countries such as China are starting to actively address through regulations and enforcement⁴, for example with an 'umbrella' of policies under their national Five-Year Plan for water security which was released in October 2021.

Cotton

Cotton is a key area of water use. The second highest produced fibre globally (24% of global production in 2020)⁵, it is also one of fashion's thirstiest fibres⁶. In many cases, surface and groundwater sources are diverted to irrigate cotton fields with water being wasted through evaporation and inefficient water management⁷.



¹ [Water Intensity Indicators in the Global Retail Sector](#), Water Resources Management.

² [UN Water](#), United Nations.

³ [The Issues: Water](#), Common Objective.

⁴ [End of Fast Fashion](#), China Water Risk.

⁵ [Preferred Fiber & Materials Market Report 2021](#), Textile Exchange.

⁶ [Fixing Fashion](#), House of Commons Environmental Audit Committee.

⁷ [Cotton](#), WWF.

Electronics

Extending the lifespan of electronic devices could offer the potential to save both water and carbon; for example on average 29% more water and 31% more carbon can be saved for each extra year a smartphone is used⁸.

Food and farming

Economic growth relies on water being available, as it is essential for food and farming. The UN Sustainable Development Goals specifically state that water plays a critical role in agriculture and that improved water stewardship can enhance agricultural productivity, contributing to food security and improved nutrition.

Key steps the retail sector can take

- Sourcing cotton from certified sustainable farms
- Utilising water-saving or waterless dyeing and textile processing
- Increase in alternative water sources
- Brands to promote energy and water saving measures to consumers
- Consumers choosing pre-loved clothing
- Extending the lifespan of electronic devices

⁸ Best Buy: Water Withdrawal in 2021, GlobalData

⁹ UN Water, United Nations, accessed July 2023

¹⁰ Partnerships and cooperation for water, UNESCO



Inspiring change & enhancing productivity

As a consumer-facing industry, retail is perfectly positioned to inspire change that can secure a water positive future and accelerate progress towards a sustainable world.

Action here will be inextricably linked to addressing broader challenges around fast fashion and moving towards a circular economy mindset with all retail goods. Improved water stewardship can also enhance agricultural productivity, contributing to food security and improved nutrition.

Read the full list of recommendations and explore best practice examples in [Thirst for change: Securing a water positive future.](#)

