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PRESS RELEASE

Red Cross Lower Austria and Saubermacher launch pilot project for textile circular economy

What to do with donated clothing that does not find buyers in thrift stores and cannot be reused in any other way? The Lower Austrian Red Cross and the waste management and recycling company Saubermacher are exploring this question in a joint one-year pilot project. Saubermacher is analyzing selected textiles from the Lower Austrian Red Cross's 37 Henry stores to determine their material composition and examines the options for material recycling.

The pilot project focuses on clothing items that meet the quality standards of Henry stores but have not found buyers, despite repeated attempts to sell them and promotional measures such as price reductions. Only when it is no longer possible to donate them to local social welfare organizations or use them in charitable relief efforts—such as after flood disasters—are the textiles included in the pilot project. During the test phase, this amounts to approximately 20 tons of unsold used textiles from Lower Austria. Together, the Red Cross and Saubermacher aim to develop suitable material recycling pathways for this textile stream.

From mixed textiles to the right recycling method

Reuse ranks first in the waste hierarchy in the context of the circular economy. Only after all possibilities for reuse have been exhausted is it determined which recycling options are suitable for the remaining textile mix—ranging from use in new textiles to applications outside the textile industry. Saubermacher first analyzes the composition of the used clothing and the materials it contains after an initial sorting process. Next, the company determines which fractions are suitable for a closed-loop process. In such procedures, fibers from used textiles are processed so that they can be reused in textile applications. However, not all textiles can be recycled into new yarn. In such cases, open-loop applications are considered—for example, for automotive accessories, insulation materials, furniture, or acoustic panels. Only

when neither reuse nor material recycling—whether in open- or closed-loop processes—is technically or economically feasible does thermal recovery serve as the final step.

Pilot project provides data for next steps

The joint initiative is intentionally designed as a 12-month pilot project. Material compositions and potential recycling pathways are being documented to gain reliable insights into the recycling options available for various textiles from Henry stores and to identify any technical or economic limitations. For customers of Henry stores as well as donors, nothing will change as a result of the pilot project: Resale—and thus the continued use of suitable clothing items—remains the priority.

Henry stores: Secondhand with additional value

Since the opening of its first location in Baden in 2013, the Henry store network has continued to expand. There are now 37 locations throughout Lower Austria. The product range includes women's, men's, children's, and teen clothing, as well as shoes, bags, and accessories; some locations also carry tableware and furniture. Through donations and purchases, items can be put to reuse; the proceeds go toward social projects run by the health and social services departments of the respective Red Cross district offices, as well as to emergency aid.

Hans Ebner, President Red Cross National Association Lower Austria: *“As the Red Cross Lower Austria, we help give used items and clothing a second life. With our 37 Henry stores, we preserve resources while providing affordable fashion for the people in Lower Austria. With the pilot project, we’re now taking an important step forward: We want to find out how textiles that fail to find buyers after multiple attempts at sale can be kept in circulation at the highest possible quality in the future.”*

Andreas Opelt, CEO Saubermacher: *“The circular economy is a team effort and can only succeed when different partners come together. The Red Cross brings years of experience in the field of reuse, while Saubermacher contributes its expertise in material analysis and recycling. Through this joint pilot project, we aim to gather reliable data on which textiles are suitable for which recycling pathways and where the technical and economic limits lie. The insights we gain will bring us one step closer to a circular textile economy.”*

Eva-Maria Wurzer, Business Development Textiles Saubermacher: *“The biggest challenge in textile recycling lies in the diversity of materials. Cotton, polyester, blended fabrics, and fibers of varying qualities cannot all be recycled using a single process. With this pilot project, we are creating a robust data foundation for this textile stream from Henry stores. This will allow us to accurately assess what proportion is suitable for reuse, closed-loop, and open-loop applications.”*

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From left to right: Hannes Buxbaum, Red Cross National Association Lower Austria; Andreas Opelt, CEO Saubermacher; Astrid Kepplinger-Past, Red Cross National Association Lower Austria; Eva-Maria Wurzer, Business Development Textiles Saubermacher; Hans Ebner, President Red Cross National Association Lower Austria

About Saubermacher

Saubermacher AG is an international waste management and recycling company based in Feldkirchen near Graz. The family business was founded in 1979 by Hans and Margret Roth and is a competent partner for approximately 1,600 municipalities and around 42,000 companies. The company employs around 3,800 people in Austria, Germany, Czechia, Slovakia, Hungary, Slovenia, Croatia and North Macedonia. Saubermacher focuses on smart services and innovative (recycling) technologies and invests in research and development to turn new ideas into operational solutions. The company partners with numerous municipalities, cities, and waste management companies and has received several international awards for its commitment to sustainability. More at [saubermacher.com](https://www.saubermacher.com).

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