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A global first for circularity: Södra and Lenzing receive largest EU LIFE subsidy for recycling project

- EU funding for textile recycling project on an industrial scale
- Huge boost to circularity
- Lenzing and Södra – a long-standing partnership for systemic change

Lenzing/Växjö – The Lenzing Group, a world-leading provider of specialty fibers for the textile and nonwoven industries, has taken another major step towards achieving a circular future together with the Swedish pulp producer Södra. The project will be supported by an EU subsidy of EUR 10 million as part of the LIFE 2022¹ program to develop the recycling of textile waste on an industrial scale.

Under the banner of LIFE TREATS (Textile Recycling in Europe AT Scale)², both companies are pooling their decades-long experience, knowledge and technology to develop the unique OnceMore® process in this project, which is co-funded by the EU. Lenzing will play a particularly crucial role in this process by deploying its expertise in recycling and its innovative REFIBRA™ technology. This will enable a variety of complex, colored textiles containing a mixture of cotton, polyester and other components including elastane to be processed and recycled in future. This next step, which is due to begin in the second quarter of 2023 and will run for four and a half years, will involve the construction and management of a facility for joint process development, as well as an extension of the OnceMore® process. This will allow 60,000 tonnes of pulp – comprising 50% recycled material and 50% renewable pulp from sustainable forestry – to be produced at Södra's Swedish plant in Mörrum. Moreover, the joint project will make a significant contribution to the EU's action plan for circularity, which is supported by the European Climate, Infrastructure and Environment Executive Agency (CINEA).

¹ https://cinea.ec.europa.eu/programmes/life_en

² Project 101113614 — LIFE22-ENV-SE-TREATS

“Today only one percent of the world’s textile waste is recycled, putting an enormous burden on the environment. With the help of this significant funding, Södra and Lenzing are ready to provide one of the main solutions in terms of chemical recycling and become the enabler for the circular textile economy,” says Åsa Degerman, Manager OnceMore® by Södra.

“Tackling the problem of textile waste requires a systematic approach, as well as technological solutions on an industrial scale,” says Sonja Zak, Head of Textile Sourcing & Cooperations at the Lenzing Group. “The LIFE TREATS project therefore follows an integrated approach to achieve real change and reduce the negative environmental and social impacts of the textile industry in the EU and beyond,” she adds.

“As the first large-scale project of its kind, LIFE TREATS will have a positive influence on the textile industry as a whole, create new circular business opportunities and increase the share of recycled fibers in new clothing,” comments Åsa Degerman, Manager of OnceMore® at Södra.

Forthcoming legislation such as the amendment to the EU’s Waste Framework Directive, in addition to increased user responsibility, the decline in export markets for used textiles and evidence of deteriorating quality in collected textiles point to major changes ahead in the treatment of textile waste. Lenzing and Södra acknowledge and are committed to complying with the waste hierarchy. Their procurement will be limited to the group of materials that cannot be reused in any other way. The project partners’ aim is not to undermine the repurposing of used textiles, but to prevent valuable fiber resources from being sent to landfill or incinerated.

Partnership for systemic change

The transition to a truly circular economy requires collaboration between several parties. Lenzing represents only one part of the textile and nonwoven value chain and supports cooperation between partners across the whole chain. Partnerships and projects such as these help Lenzing to promote and accelerate systemic change.

Lenzing and Södra have been working together on textile recycling since 2021, making a crucial contribution to the promotion of circularity in the fashion industry. In the course of their cooperation, the companies plan to share their knowledge and jointly develop methods to facilitate the broader use of cellulose-based used textiles on an industrial scale. The OnceMore® pulp developed by both companies will then be used for various purposes, including as a raw material for the production of Lenzing’s TENCEL™ branded specialty fibers using REFIBRA™ technology. The aim of LIFE TREATS is to reach an annual processing capacity of 50,000 tonnes of textile waste by 2027. According to Sonja Zak, Head of Textile Sourcing & Cooperations at the Lenzing Group and Åsa Degerman, Manager of OnceMore® at Södra: “This project is a fantastic example of how we can join forces to connect companies along the textile recycling value chain.”

In line with its circular economy vision, “We give waste a new life. Every day”, Lenzing is driving the industry towards achieving a fully-fledged circular economy by endeavoring to give waste a new life in all aspects of its core business. Lenzing has been developing future-proof innovations in recycling for years, including its REFIBRA™ and Eco Cycle technologies. Beside the use of pure dissolving wood pulp, these technologies enable the processing of a large proportion of recycling material that is derived from cutting scraps in cotton production and used textiles.

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About the Lenzing Group

The Lenzing Group stands for ecologically responsible production of specialty fibers made from the renewable raw material wood. As an innovation leader, Lenzing is a partner of global textile and nonwoven manufacturers and drives many new technological developments.

The Lenzing Group's high-quality fibers form the basis for a variety of textile applications ranging from elegant clothing to versatile denims and high-performance sports clothing. Due to their consistent high quality, their biodegradability and compostability Lenzing fibers are also highly suitable for hygiene products and agricultural applications.

The business model of the Lenzing Group goes far beyond that of a traditional fiber producer. Together with its customers and partners, Lenzing develops innovative products along the value chain, creating added value for consumers. The Lenzing Group strives for the efficient utilization and processing of all raw materials and offers solutions to help redirect the textile sector towards a closed-loop economy. In order to reduce the speed of global warming and to accomplish the targets of the Paris Climate Agreement and the "Green Deal" of the EU Commission, Lenzing has a clear vision: namely to make a zero-carbon future come true.

Key Facts & Figures Lenzing Group 2022

Revenue: EUR 2.57 bn

Nominal capacity: 1,145,000 tonnes

Number of employees (headcount): 8,301

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About Södra

Södra was founded in 1938 on the idea that we are stronger together. We are now the largest forest-owner association in Sweden, with 51,000 family forest owners as members. Together, Södra's members own a world-leading industry that processes forest raw material into renewable products such as pulp, timber, building systems, liquid bioproducts and energy. Rooted in the forest, we grow the future.

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