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How ESG, Traceability and Trade Enforcement Are Reaching All Corners of the Apparel & Footwear Industry



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Recent industry conferences reveal how sustainability, supply chain verification and trade enforcement are becoming part of a much broader business conversation.

TRACEABILITY AND TRADE ENFORCEMENT

Over the past several weeks, a series of apparel, footwear, outdoor industry, legal and international trade conferences has revealed an increasingly common direction in industry discussions. Although organized for different professional audiences, these gatherings are increasingly addressing many of the same underlying issues because of expanding requirements surrounding supply chain traceability, country-of-origin verification, forced labor due diligence, sustainability claims, extended producer responsibility (EPR) and trade enforcement.

What stands out is not simply the growing attention being given to these subjects, but how far the conversations are reaching across the industry.

At the United States Fashion Industry Association's (USFIA) November trade conference, discussions centered on customs enforcement, sourcing and product verification. At New York's Luxury Law Summit, environmental claims, circularity and EPR were examined through the lens of legal and commercial responsibility. In Portland, the Outdoor Industry Association's Catalyst Conference connected sustainability with product design, manufacturing and financial planning. Meanwhile, the Footwear Distributors and Retailers of America's (FDRA) November summits brought sustainability, innovation, traceability, tariffs and sourcing into closely related discussions.

Taken together, these gatherings point to a broader development. Customs compliance, sourcing, product development, legal, sustainability, finance and marketing are increasingly participating in conversations that were once largely confined to individual specialties.

While regulatory developments and enforcement priorities are helping drive this convergence, the conversation now extends well beyond compliance to how products are made, sourced, verified, imported, marketed and managed throughout their lifecycle.



David Uricoli participating at USFIA's 38th Annual Apparel Importers Trade & Transportation Conference, November 12, 2026, New York City.

Trade Enforcement Is Reaching Beyond Customs Departments

At USFIA's 38th Annual Apparel Importers Trade & Transportation Conference in New York on November 12, trade enforcement was a central theme.

The program addressed tariffs, changing sourcing strategies, customs enforcement priorities and the growing importance of supply chain verification. A keynote conversation with Department of Homeland Security Assistant Secretary for Trade and Economic Security Aris Kourkoumelis reinforced the prominence of enforcement in current trade policy.

One session, *Beyond Cotton: Proving What's in the Product as Enforcement Widens*, presented by FibreTrace Technologies and Gherzi Americas, brought the discussion directly to product and material verification.

Country-of-origin declarations and forced labor compliance increasingly depend on information originating much earlier in the product lifecycle. For apparel and footwear companies, that information may involve raw materials, fiber content, manufacturing processes, subcontractors and multiple production stages.

Customs specialists remain responsible for understanding import requirements, but the information they need increasingly comes from sourcing, product development, manufacturing and supplier management.

A similar direction is reflected in recent public programs offered by the American Apparel & Footwear Association (AAFA). Its October webinar, *Traceability as a Management System: Getting the Fundamentals Right*, addressed data governance, supplier engagement, risk mapping and internal accountability. A subsequent November webinar on preparing for the EU Forced Labour Regulation examined supply chain evidence and verification.

These discussions illustrate how traceability is being presented not simply as a technology solution or customs requirement, but as a broader management discipline involving several business functions.

Sustainability Is Reaching Across Business Functions

A similar expansion of the conversation was evident at the Outdoor Industry Association's October 26 Catalyst Conference in Portland, where sustainability was discussed alongside product development, manufacturing, material innovation and financial planning.

Reporting on the gathering in *Putting Sustainability to Work in Outdoor*, Courtney Caneer-Williams, Consultant with Gherzi Americas, captured the practical direction of these discussions:

> **"How do you turn commitments on textile recovery, emissions and durability into decisions about what to make and how to make it?"**

Her observation reflects how sustainability commitments are increasingly influencing product design, material selection, sourcing and commercial decisions. Discussions involving outdoor brands, manufacturers and financial leaders demonstrated that environmental objectives are becoming more closely connected to product performance, business strategy and investment.

The footwear industry offers another perspective on this convergence. FDRA's Shoe Innovation & Sustainability Summit and Shoe Trade & Logistics Strategy Summit held November 4–5 in Portland, addressed traceability, circularity, material innovation, regulatory compliance, tariffs and sourcing.

Footwear's complex combination of materials, components and global manufacturing relationships makes these connections particularly relevant. FDRA President and CEO Matt Priest underscored the industry's dependence on international sourcing in a September 2025 statement:

> **"As an industry that brings in 99% of the shoes sold in this country, we obviously rely on the ability to source products all over the world."**

The footwear discussions demonstrate how international sourcing, trade policy, sustainability and product verification are becoming part of a broader industry dialogue.

The November 10 Luxury Law Summit in New York brought yet another professional audience into this conversation. Its workshop, *From Packaging to Product Claims to Circularity: Sustainability Issues for Luxury Brands*, examined EPR, environmental marketing claims, greenwashing restrictions, circularity and sustainability-related litigation.

For legal, marketing and brand management professionals, sustainability and traceability increasingly intersect with consumer protection, advertising standards and corporate responsibility. Environmental claims may depend on material composition, manufacturing practices, certifications or recycled content, information that originates within sourcing and production operations.

Although these conferences served different audiences, their discussions reveal a common

development. Sustainability is no longer confined to environmental specialists, just as trade enforcement is no longer exclusively a customs concern. Product development, sourcing, finance, legal and marketing are increasingly engaging with related issues, each bringing its own responsibilities and perspectives to the conversation.

The Product Is Becoming a Common Point of Reference

Across these conferences, one connecting element repeatedly emerges: the product itself.

Whether the discussion concerns country of origin, forced labor, environmental performance, circularity or consumer claims, the starting point is understanding what the product contains, where its materials originated and how it was manufactured.

However, this information alone does not establish legal origin, prove the absence of forced labor or substantiate every sustainability claim. Additional documentation and verification may be required.

The common need for reliable product and supply chain information helps explain why traceability is appearing in conferences devoted to customs enforcement, sustainability, sourcing, technology and product innovation.

It is increasingly part of a broader conversation about the reliability and usefulness of product information throughout a business.

EPR Is Broadening the Conversation Further

Extended producer responsibility provides another example of an environmental regulatory subject reaching new areas of the apparel and footwear industries.

California's SB 707, which establishes a textile producer responsibility framework, was discussed at OIA Catalyst. EPR also appeared in the Luxury Law Summit's sustainability workshop and FDRA's sourcing-related compliance discussions.

These are different professional settings addressing the same emerging area of responsibility.

EPR connects product stewardship and end-of-life management with product characteristics, reporting and financing.

As programs develop, their implementation can involve product development, sourcing, sustainability, legal, finance and commercial management.

The broader point is that EPR is no longer being discussed exclusively as a waste-management or environmental issue. Its appearance across legal, sourcing and sustainability conferences demonstrates how product lifecycle responsibilities are entering mainstream industry conversations.

The Convergence Is Reaching Across the Industry

What makes these recent industry gatherings noteworthy is not simply the consistency of their themes, but the diversity of the professional audiences now discussing them.

Trade enforcement, supply chain traceability, forced labor due diligence, sustainability verification, EPR and environmental claims are appearing across conferences traditionally focused on customs, sourcing, product innovation, sustainability, legal affairs and commercial strategy.

Each organization approaches these subjects from a different perspective, yet their agendas increasingly intersect. Customs compliance is becoming part of broader sourcing and product verification discussions. Sustainability is reaching product development, manufacturing and finance. Traceability is gaining relevance to legal and marketing, while EPR is bringing product lifecycle responsibilities into commercial and operational conversations.

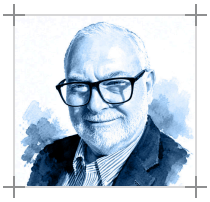
This does not mean the industry has reached a common solution or that individual regulatory requirements have become interchangeable. Rather, it demonstrates how professional boundaries surrounding these subjects are becoming less distinct.

For years, apparel and footwear companies have addressed many of these responsibilities through separate departments, industry forums and specialized compliance programs. The recent sequence of conferences and webinars suggests that the conversation is changing.

Perhaps the most significant development is not the expansion of any single regulatory requirement, but how widely these interconnected issues are now reaching across the apparel and footwear industries.

What began as separate discussions about customs enforcement, responsible sourcing, environmental performance and regulatory compliance is increasingly becoming a broader industry conversation about the products companies make, the supply chains behind them and the information needed to support their claims.

The convergence is no longer confined to individual specialties. It is reaching across the industry, bringing customs compliance, sourcing, product development, legal, sustainability, finance and marketing into a much closer conversation.



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