

PROTECTIVE CLOTHING IS NOT ORDINARY TEXTILE – WHY POLITICS SHOULD REGULATE IN A MORE DIFFERENTIATED MANNER



Interview with Sven Holst – COO at HB Protective Wear and Chair of the PPE Working Group at ETSA

1. Introduction – Panel & Relevance

Question:

Mr. Holst, you were part of the “GermanFashion Panel Talk: Style Meets Safety” at A+A. What key insights did you take away from it?

Sven Holst:

The discussion has shown that personal protective equipment (PPE) is significantly more affected by global legislative initiatives than other textile sectors—and that these regulations often do not consider protective clothing as a separate category. Although protective clothing is part of the textile industry, it is subject to completely different technical, normative, and safety-related requirements. These differences must be taken into account much more clearly in policy-making.

2. Political issues

Question:

You mentioned that politicians often view the textile industry as a homogeneous block. What is your criticism of this?

Sven Holst:

When political debates refer to “the textile industry,” this encompasses

everything: sports textiles, workwear, fashion, home textiles, technical textiles —and protective clothing. This equation ignores the fact that protective clothing is not simply another textile product, but rather safety-related equipment that is subject to strictly defined standards. While general textiles are primarily consumer goods, protective clothing/PPE serves to protect human life and is designed for durability. This discrepancy is not sufficiently reflected in many legislative processes.

Question:

What misconceptions arise when protective clothing is regulated in the same way as regular textiles?

Sven Holst:

The fundamental error is the transfer of requirements that may be appropriate for other textile products to protective textile equipment. Regular textiles usually have short life cycles and can be easily modified with new materials or fiber constructions. PPE, on the other hand, must be durable, repairable, remain functional in defined extreme situations, and use high-quality and complex materials.

Here, a situational distinction, e.g., from fast fashion, can be helpful: Fast fashion follows short-lived trends with rapidly changing collections; protective clothing, on the other hand, follows clear safety standards with defined testing procedures and is designed for durability and the highest possible protection. Both areas formally fall under the term “textile,” but fulfill completely different tasks and requirements.

Question:

What does this equal treatment mean in concrete terms for PPE manufacturers such as HB Protective Wear?

Sven Holst:

Many regulations—whether at the EU level or globally—were originally intended for consumer textiles and do not take technical protection requirements into account. As a result, PPE manufacturers must attempt to obtain exemptions or clarifications after the fact. This causes uncertainty, additional costs, and slows down innovation processes. Small and medium-sized enterprises in particular face major structural disadvantages in this regard.

3. Practical consequences & risks

Question:

What examples show that textile-related regulations for protective clothing/PPE can even be counterproductive?

Sven Holst:

Many sustainability requirements are based on textiles being made from a single material, easily recyclable, and uncontaminated at the end of their life. This does not work for protective clothing/PPE.

We need highly complex material composites, functional barriers, and specific fiber technologies that are not used in other areas of textiles. This structure is essential for optimal protective functions.

If these special features are ignored, there is a risk that regulations could compromise protective performance or compliance with standards.

One example that illustrates this problem is the discussion about banning chemical compounds such as PFAS. They are easily replaceable and unnecessary in consumer textiles, but in certain PPE applications they fulfill safety-critical functions – which is why a differentiated approach is essential.

Question:

What impact does this have on development, material selection, and certification?

Sven Holst:

PPE is strictly standardized in Europe. Materials are selected not only for their properties, but also for their ability to protect against specific hazards such as heat, chemicals, or electric arcs. The transfer of general requirements for the textile sector can lead to conflicting goals in this area.

Many textile specifications simply cannot be applied without compromising protective functions. In addition, increasing documentation requirements make the work of smaller specialized manufacturers considerably more difficult.

Question:

How does this lack of differentiation affect innovation and competitiveness?

Sven Holst:

If PPE falls under the same regulatory framework as the entire textile industry, this creates disproportionate burdens. Major players in the textile sector have extensive compliance structures in place—something we don't have in the PPE SME sector. The result: more resources for regulation, less for innovation. This hinders progress where it would actually be particularly important: in the development of modern protective solutions.

4. Critical counterposition

Question:

One often hears the argument that equal rules are fair. Why do you think this is not the case?

Sven Holst:

Equal treatment only creates fairness if the starting points are comparable. However, protective clothing/PPE is not a normal textile, but a safety-relevant product with clearly defined standard tests, long life cycles, and high protection requirements.

Whereas fast fashion or general textiles allow for flexibility or changes in materials, PPE is embedded in standards that must be strictly adhered to. Differentiated regulation does not create injustice here—it enables regulations to actually achieve their goals in the first place.

5. Expectations towards politics

Question:

What changes would you like to see in the legislation?

Sven Holst:

We need a clear, differentiated approach within political processes that distinguishes between everyday textiles for private use and, for example, technical textiles or protective clothing.

At the EU level in particular—from eco-design to chemical regulation

—the different tasks, risks, and requirements of the products should be taken into account. This is the only way to create practical regulations that support environmental goals and health protection on the one hand, but also ensure the necessary functions of these products in the future on the other.

Question:

How can communication between politicians and the PPE industry be improved?

Sven Holst:

PSA expertise must be incorporated at an earlier stage. Industry associations such as ETSA, EURATEX, ESF, t+m, and German Fashion are doing important work in this area, but dialogue must be more systematically embedded. If PSA is only considered after draft regulations have been finalized, we always run the risk of ending up in exception processes—and that is inefficient for everyone involved.

6. Conclusion

Question:

What would you like to see from politicians?

Sven Holst:

More differentiation, more practical relevance, and clear recognition that PPE is part of the textile industry—but can never be treated like normal textiles.

be safe. we care.

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