



Adding substance to sustainability

For those working in the global leather industry, sustainability and the environment take on added importance as it is the tanning industry that converts the by-product of the agricultural and meat industries into a valued product. While the food industry ensures a sustained flow of the by-product for tanneries, at the same time it depends on them to manage environmental issues resulting from its by-product, the hides and skins.

Transforming the by-product creates its own issues including the treatment of wastewaters, energy usage and the chemistry upon which the leather industry relies in producing its value-added material. The tanning sector in turn looks to the chemical industry to assist by supplying sustainable and environmentally sound solutions.

One of the chemical companies that has taken positive steps in recent years to ensure its own sustainability credentials is Clariant, which has been developing sustainable process solutions for tanners and finishers to help them minimise their environmental footprints.

"Sustainability is not new for Clariant," says Oliver Kinkel, Head of BU Leather Services, at Clariant. "We have a long and proven track record of generating innovative, more sustainable solutions for our partners in the industry. It's an ongoing process to reconcile the demands of the environment, social responsibility and economics; it's a balancing act but we don't compromise." Ralph Blach, Head of Marketing & Application Development, adds: "As a major chemical producer, it may seem ironic but we actively try to reduce chemical demand in the solutions we provide to our customers."

The underlying principle is to make chemical reactions happen more efficiently, using energy and water more effectively and keeping waste, effluents and greenhouse gases to a minimum. It is part of the integrated sustainability approach operated by the

company and the same applies to its customers. They need to work safely and efficiently, generating a minimum of leather waste while achieving maximum yield and quality.

Clariant's chrome-free EasyWhite Tan system, based on its Granofin Easy F-90 chemistry, is seen as an excellent example of sustainability in practice. The first new fundamental change in tanning for over a century, EasyWhite Tan has reduced process time, energy consumption, and chemical usage; it removed the need for additional salt, cut total water consumption and generated extremely fine grain leather with improved yield.

Another example is its environmentally friendlier Aqualen product range. These innovative top coat products used in finishing leather are water-based, NMP/NEP free, with low or no VOCs. Emissions are reduced and all hazardous materials have been eliminated; their formulation provides an extra cost benefit as no additives are required.

"We are also very aware that leather has a very long life cycle," states Mr Kinkel, "and to this end we need to work towards ensuring better environmental compatibility when these products are recycled or disposed of. It's why we work continuously to enhance the recycling and reuse of leather chemicals."

The company has also achieved some notable sustainability results of its own. Since 2005, Clariant has reduced its energy consumption by 24%, its direct CO₂ emissions by 47%, water usage has fallen by 20% and waste generated has been reduced by 40%. Since 2007 it has cut its specific global warming potential by a whisper under 12%. With its sustainability reporting Clariant transparently communicates its sustainable issues. It appears that sustainability is not just a slogan but an integrated part of its business strategy and, on that basis, Clariant is proving that it's definitely adding substance to the concept of sustainability. 

CREDIT: BMJ / SHUTTERSTOCK