



*Cattle, sheep and goats emit greenhouse gases, but it's the businesses that benefit from the main product the animals produce (usually meat) that must include these emissions in their carbon footprint calculations.*

CREDIT: SHUTTERSTOCK/HEATH JOHNSON

## A work in progress

*COTANCE has shown true leadership in helping the leather industry fight its corner on the question of carbon footprint. Negotiating with the European Commission and with other industries as part of a pilot project is proving to be hard work, but the prize, of leather receiving official recognition as a 'green' product, is a precious one. And if COTANCE's bid to win this prize is successful, there are meaningful, positive consequences for the whole of the global leather industry.*

Debate continues about how much, if any, of the upstream carbon footprint of its raw material the leather industry should take responsibility for when assessing its own impact on the environment. With the help of work it has done with London-based lifecycle analysis consultancy Trucost, luxury leathergoods group Kering has decided to attribute between 8% and 10% of cattle's carbon footprint to the leather it uses. This is in keeping with figures that some prominent tanning groups, including PrimeAsia, have quoted, saying a percentage around that mark reflects the proportion of the economic value of a cow that you can attribute to the hide.

This works for many companies in the face of the intense negotiation that takes place over the price of leather and the quantities of the material that finished product brands want to buy. Some of these brands, particularly in the fickle world of athletic footwear, have shown in recent years that they require

little persuasion to turn to synthetic materials instead. When this happens, it's usually because of price, but brands in the past have used carbon footprint as an excuse for using less leather, presenting consumers with the message that their shoes no longer contain leather because leather, meat and cows are all bad for the environment. It usually goes unsaid that the synthetic materials they use as substitutes for leather often have a much greater impact on the environment.

In this context, it seems clear to *World Leather* that even companies who accept 7%, 8%, 9% or 10% of the carbon footprint of the cow as part of the carbon footprint of the finished leather often do so to be politic and to avoid upsetting or even driving away sensitive customers, rather than out of conviction that tanners have responsibility for part of the greenhouse gas emissions of cows, sheep or goats. Anything for a quiet life.



*COTANCE secretary general, Gustavo González Quijano (right) with Milan-based consultant Federico Brugnoli. Their work and leadership on this issue have allowed the leather industry to present a strong argument for tanners taking zero responsibility for upstream emissions from livestock when calculating leather's carbon footprint.*

CREDIT: WTP

### Genuine leadership

At least since the autumn of 2012, the leather industry's representative body in the European Union, COTANCE, has shown it does not want a quiet life. The Brussels-based body has demonstrated genuine leadership on this important question, making it clear from the outset that its work shows that the leather industry's share of the carbon footprint of the cattle and meat industries should be zero.

At a meeting in Shanghai that September of the Global Leather Co-ordinating Committee, the body that has representatives of the three global industry associations—the International Council of Tanners, International Council of Hide Skin & Leather Traders Associations and International Union of Leather Technologists and Chemists Societies—COTANCE, with the support of the United Nations Industrial Development Organization pushed for, and secured, an endorsement for a then-new technical report on this subject. This report, the work of Milan-based consultant Federico Brugnoli, has been subjected to and stood up to scrutiny for two years now and has convinced many that zero is the correct share for leather of cows' carbon footprint.

In all, Mr Brugnoli has been a consultant to the leather industry for some 17 years and drew on earlier work on lifecycle analysis by Danish academic Bo Pedersen Weidema. The Weidema position is simple enough: you have to identify the main product for which the animal is reared and apportion to it 100% of the environmental weight. Leather that comes from cattle, goat and sheep (which is almost all the leather in the world) is never going to hold that status. Those animals are looked after and sold for meat and milk; their hides and skins also have a value, but this is the least relevant reason for farmers and packer companies to take an interest in the animal. It is the products that provide the farmer and the packer firm with their main reason for going into and staying in the business they are in that have to 'carry the can' on carbon footprint.

This is the same as saying there is nothing tanners can do



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about the greenhouse gas a cow, sheep, goat or other animal emits before packer companies transport it to the abattoir to satisfy consumers' demands for meat. A hide or skin will become available as a by-product of this process and most consumers and all tanners believe human beings may as well show their appreciation of the beast by using this material to make beautiful, versatile, sensuous, long-lasting leather. What would happen to hides and skins if tanners stopped buying them? Would this affect the number of animals slaughtered?

### Ignore the correction

Nevertheless, when consumers know the links between leather and livestock, reports that focus (and sometimes exaggerate) livestock's contribution to global warming are certain to affect some consumers' thinking about leather. This has happened in the recent past when the UN's Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) said in the 2006 report *Livestock's Long Shadow* that the lifecycle of livestock produced 18% of all greenhouse gas emissions, more than all forms of transportation combined. It took years and the intervention of Professor Frank Mitloehner, now the chair of the FAO's committee, to assess the environmental impact of the livestock industry and for it to emerge that the original report was flawed. Professor Mitloehner and his research team at the University of California, Davis, proved in 2009 that the 2006 analysis was incorrect. In a paper entitled 'Clearing the Air: Livestock's Contributions to Climate Change', the professor concluded that, in the US, rearing

livestock contributes 3.4% of greenhouse gas emissions, while transportation's share of the total is 26%.

Most people support the idea that we should do as much as we can to mitigate greenhouse gas emissions, from cows, from rice fields, from municipal solid waste, from our consumption of fossil fuels and from all other sources. Projects are under way in Australia, Brazil, the US, Europe, Argentina (see separate article in this section as just one example) and elsewhere to reduce or reuse the biogas that livestock emits and there is progress.

Part of the problem in the leather industry preferring a quiet life is that too little is heard of this progress and of most examples of action that tanners and their suppliers are taking to have as little impact on the environment as possible. Professor Mitloehner provoked few headlines when he put the FAO straight on the comparison between cattle's contribution to global warming and that of transport, whereas the message from the erroneous original report appeared everywhere and is frequently still repeated today. At the start of December 2014, an independent policy institute based in London, Chatham House, issued a report that contradicts the IPCC (see separate article in this section) and urges governments to include action on livestock and meat production in their climate-change strategies. Specifically, it says: "Greenhouse gas emissions from the livestock sector are estimated to account for 14.5% of the global total, more than direct emissions from the transport sector." The number is amended, but the sentiment is familiar, and the notes for the document reference the FAO.

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*Cow carcasses in an abattoir. The animals were reared with meat in mind.*

CREDIT: SHUTTERSTOCK/PIXELPETER

### Pilot initiative

COTANCE is one of the industry bodies that now want to fight back. A fundamental part of its fight so far is its attempt to have leather included in a wider European Commission pilot project that is examining the environmental footprint of a range of things European consumers buy. The Brussels-based Commission has agreed to fund a number of pilot initiatives to do this and, from the start, COTANCE wanted leather to be part of the exercise. The big prize at the end of this lengthy project will be that the European Union will classify leather as, officially, a green product, and this is a development that will have global significance and will deliver a boost to tanners everywhere.

There has been, and remains, much work to do. The leather industry is not working in isolation, though. The Commission also received expressions of interest from representatives of the meat, dairy, animal feed and pet food sectors and suggested grouping these together with the leather industry in a new working group of “stakeholders in the cattle value chain”. This complicates things, but lots of different industries have their eyes on the same ‘green product’ prize and grouping different sectors with a degree of common interest together was probably inevitable. Broadly, the European Commission supports green products and green industries, but has said it wants consumers to have confidence that products claiming to be green really do have a low impact on the environment. It’s nowhere near enough just to shout, ‘Count us in’. You have to subject your supply chain to careful scrutiny and prove your green credentials beyond any doubt.

The Commission has, therefore, asked representatives of the leather, meat, dairy, animal feed and pet food sectors to agree

“system boundaries”, between the stakeholders in the cattle value chain on how to share environmental responsibilities. Agreeing “system boundaries” means defining which processes must be included and which excluded in determining the environmental footprint of the diverse products involved. “We cannot work in isolation,” COTANCE general secretary, Gustavo González Quijano, says. “We have until December 2014 to reach agreement, and if we cannot reach agreement by then, the Commission will make the decision for us on how to proceed. There is a framework agreement on system boundaries among the five pilots, but no agreement so far on allocation [of upstream carbon footprint].”

Setting out the leather industry’s position on this question of allocation and securing the agreement of the other sectors with a vested interest in winning ‘green product’ status is now a priority.

### Like for like comparisons

At the start of 2014, the Commission’s directorate general for the environment arranged a special training day in Brussels to help all industries aiming to take part in the pilot initiatives, including all those in the cattle value chain, understand what constitutes an environmentally friendly product in the Commission’s view. Those attending the Brussels event included a number of big hitters from the leather industry: Elisabetta Scaglia of UNIC in Italy, Kerry Senior of the UK Leather Federation, Jutta Knoedler of VDL in Germany, Rémy Gacogne of CTC in France, Albu Luminita of APPBR in Romania and consultant Federico Brugnoli, who, as mentioned, has been working for several years with the leather industry on its environmental footprint. The delegation was led by Gustavo



*Finished leather inspection at Wollsdorf Leather in Austria. Tanners want to take responsibility for the carbon footprint of leather from the abattoir to the tannery gate through which they ship their product at the end of the processing cycle.*

CREDIT: WTP

González Quijano. This group now forms the mainstay of a technical secretariat whose work to support COTANCE's initiative is ongoing.

Experts from the European Commission have said in a lengthy guidance document setting out what it needs the people representing leather and the other industries to do. Much of the discussion focused on Product Environmental Footprint (PEF), a Life Cycle Assessment (LCA)-based method of quantifying the environmental impacts of products, goods or services. PEF sets a basis for comparing one product to another, helping consumers decide which is 'greener'. A fair comparison is only possible if the results are based on the same Product Category Rules (PCRs). The guidance document references initiatives in place all around the world to try to achieve this basis for comparison, indicating, according to the European Commission, "the growing demand for such information from both public and private actors". But the guidance document also flags up a critical problem: all too often, PCRs used to compare one product to another are "similar but different", it says, limiting the levels of help they can offer to consumers or organisations that want to make informed comparisons between products.

### Real and virtual products

Part of the technical secretariat's work has been to develop a "model" for a representative product, to try to give a concrete example of what the PEF would look like in the real world. It is permissible to use a virtual (non-existing) product to do this, but a clear consensus developed quite quickly among technical secretariat members that, as leather is a tangible product that most consumers know already, it would be better to focus on the real rather than the virtual. Part of that consensus was that this

real representative product should be leather for shoe uppers made from the grain side of a bovine hide to a final thickness of less than 1.7 millimetres. It is a product for which it will be easy to find the data necessary for working out most aspects of its environmental footprint. "Leather is already defined," Federico Brugnoli says. "There are different products, of course, but they all use drums, they all use similar machines, but it's a good idea for us to use this bovine leather as it is, perhaps, the most representative."

It is for this product, then, that the technical secretariat has worked to draw up a PEF declaration. This will range from a description of the function, technical performance, intended use of the product, its "expected service lifetime" and its characteristics, to calculations relating to its environmental footprint. It needs to be comprehensive and transparent to satisfy the European Commission and a public consultation exercise that will begin at the start of 2015. After reading the European Commission's guidance document more than once, Federico Brugnoli says he believes the technical secretariat COTANCE has put in place is "not so far away" from being able to make a strong PEF declaration.

One thing that is certain is that the scope of the PEF declaration that the technical committee puts together on behalf of Europe's leather industry, where its calculations for the representative product start and where they finish, will be faithful to the arguments that COTANCE has presented consistently for more than two years now. The leather industry cares about what happens to cattle and other animals whose hides and skins it uses as by-products, but the tanning industry's carbon footprint begins at the abattoir, where the material is first put aside for use by tanners, and ends when finished leather goes into the onward distribution chain at the tannery gate. ☉