



RSL, ZDHC and the brands

Leather chemicals manufacturer Lanxess ran a successful two-day seminar in Cologne in January, offering representatives of a wide range of finished product brands detailed information and in-depth discussion on the subject of how restricted substance lists are affecting the production of leather.



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A two-day seminar that leather chemicals manufacturer Lanxess organised to raise awareness among finished product brands of the implications for leather of restricted substance lists (RSLs) took place in January in Cologne.

More than 50 delegates attended and heard talks from senior representatives of the Lanxess leather business unit as well as from key outside agencies, with the presentations covering how the global leather supply chain works, what technologies are available for the preservation of hides and finished leather and the framework that exists to make sure those technologies are safe for consumers, workers and the environment.

Companies who were represented among the delegates included Deichmann, C&A, Kering, Esprit, Burberry and Hugo Boss.

At the start of the event, Dr Dietrich Tegtmeier, vice-president of the Lanxess business unit, told *World Leather*: "This is not about Lanxess but about promoting leather as an industry, particularly to the brands."

He said one of his concerns is that some brand representatives sometimes seem to think they can "cut and paste" what they know about textiles and use that knowledge for leather too. To allow them to continue to do this unchecked could result in a major problem for the leather industry, he added.

Dr Tegtmeier explained to the brand representatives present that chemicals were a necessary part of the tanning process, pointing out that, in its natural state, a hide contains moisture and, to stop the material from drying out and becoming shell-like, like a pelt, tanners have the task of replacing the natural

moisture with chemicals that become fixed to the triple-helix structure of the collagen in the animal's skin. To give an example, he said that if one square-metre of finished automotive leather weighs 700 grammes, as much as 50% of that weight might be chemicals. "Standardisation of this is very difficult," he added, "because no two hides are the same. There are different breeds of cattle, 950 in Europe alone, and the quality of their skin varies greatly. It's simply impossible to use the same recipe to make leather in every case."

Apple-for-apple comparison

President of the German tanning industry association VDL, Thomas Strebost of Heller-Leder, said at the event that he thinks there is a danger of companies that buy and use leather becoming unrealistic in the demands they make of tanners regarding the chemicals used to make leather.

"We face some restrictions now that are so low that if they applied to other sectors they would cause uproar," Mr Strebost said. "The restrictions in some countries on formaldehyde, for example, would make it impossible for people to eat apples."

He said tanners need to protect their products from fungus but accept entirely that there should be no risk to the consumer from the technology used to preserve hides or finished leather. "We need to use the minimum required to preserve the hides," he said, "but we need some time to work out what those minimum effective levels are."

Lanxess's Andreas Weckmann told delegates that one kilo of wet blue will typically be treated with between 1,000 and 1,500 milligrammes of biocide. He explained that if too little biocide



is used in a scenario such as wet blue being produced in summer in the southern hemisphere and shipped to Italy with sub-standard packaging and poor storage, it's only too noticeable when the hides arrive at their destination. "But the principle is sustainable preservation," he said, adding that tanners and brands are right to be concerned about what residues of the biocide might remain when wet blue is processed to the crust and finished leather stages. "It's very difficult to predict," he told the seminar, "because this too depends on the type of raw material, as well as the particular tanning and retanning processes you use, but it is possible you could be left with as much as 1,200 milligrammes of biocide per kilo, which is within the limits of acceptable exposure to the human skin."

MRSL already a reality

The second day of the event was dominated by a wide-ranging discussion on the likely effect on the leather industry of a Manufacturing Restricted Substances List (MRSL), which emphasises the need to have components (upstream of the finished product) that present no unmanageable risk to health or the environment.

The Zero Discharge of Hazardous Chemicals (ZDHC) group published version 1.1 of its MRSL at the end of 2015 and included substances often considered for use in the leather supply chain for the first time. At the end of the seminar, Dr Tegtmeier, said: "ZDHC has 21 brands on board and each of those has a number of suppliers. Therefore the MRSL is already affecting many tanneries and the tanneries are coming to us with questions. Lanxess supports the MRSL; we regard it as ambitious but realistic."

He went on to say that all but "two or three" of the almost 600 products in his company's current leather chemicals portfolio are compliant with the MRSL and that tanners who want to have 100%-compliant leather chemicals to make their leather can source everything they need from Lanxess. "That's the situation, but we know we need to certify our claim to be compliant. We would like the leather industry to find a smart way to certify this, without spending huge amounts of money on testing. We don't want this to become a gold rush for testing institutions; we would much rather have a dialogue with them."

The seminar also included a presentation from Frank Michel, executive director of ZDHC. He spoke in detail about the work his Amsterdam-based group has done since its foundation in 2011 and about the next steps it intends to take. He revealed that a new ZDHC audit protocol will be one of the milestones it achieves in 2016.

ZDHC has held back from publishing an audit protocol of its own after finding that an existing protocol put in place by the Sustainable Apparel Coalition came close to what ZDHC wanted to do. This coalition, a group nearly 200 companies and organisations, including brands, retailers, manufacturers, suppliers, NGOs and academics, has the aim of assessing the environmental and social impacts of apparel, footwear and home textiles.

Frank Michel said his organisation had been able to "harmonise" its idea of what an audit protocol should consist of with the Sustainable Apparel Coalition protocol and said ZDHC will make this protocol public in the course of this year. However, he also said his group is in talks with multi-stakeholder organisation the Leather Working Group (LWG) and will seek to incorporate elements of what takes place at tanneries during LWG audits into the new ZDHC protocol too.



Seminar participants included representatives of a number of big-name brands, including Deichmann, C&A, Kering, Esprit, Burberry and Hugo Boss.

Accentuate the positive

Of the 110 members of Germany's national chemicals manufacturers' association Tegewa, 20 are involved in the production of leather chemicals, the association's leather chemicals expert, Dr Volker Schröder, said in Cologne. He went on to say that together, according to his calculations, these 20 German companies have a share of more than 50% of the entire global leather chemicals market.

He added that Tegewa's position on restricted substance management is that it would like leather chemicals manufacturers to have "positive lists" to work from when preparing products for tanners who need to comply with increasingly complicated restricted substance lists. He said Tegewa wants its members not to have to take part in "excessive testing", but for there to be enough control to stop manufacturers from "free-riding" as well.

Something that would help, he added, would be an independent, third-party certification body in the leather supply chain to give tanners and finished product manufacturers and brands reassurance that verified products are compliant. "The leather industry should establish such a certification body," Dr Schröder commented, "to act as a competent partner to leather chemicals manufacturers. It's something that's required, but we have not been able to find such a partner. We hope one of the institutes that work in the industry will have it on their radar, but a very high level of leather chemicals expertise is required and they would all need to improve on that."

Questions about chrome

Dietrich Tegtmeier touched on the question of chrome but said he thinks it may be necessary for Lanxess to hold a second seminar later this year to have a full debate about it. "There's so much nonsense around about chrome," he said, referring to chrome-tanned leather as being the "stainless steel of the leather industry" because of properties such as a shrinkage temperature of 110°C compared to between 65 and 75 degrees for wet white. However, he went on to say that he can understand why some brands these days appear to have an aversion to chrome-tanned leather. "All the scientific reasons are there," he said, "but if a company has 35,000 sales people in stores around the world, it's hard to explain this issue well enough so that all the sales people can understand it and pass the information on to the public. It's easier to say you don't want any chrome in the leather you buy, I understand." ☺