



The organising committee at the Bangkok International Fashion Fair and Bangkok International Leather Fair (BIFF & BIL) in 2016. Pranee Kuruvelukorn is second from the right. CREDIT: BIFF & BIL

Country Commentary

Recipe for success

Thai Tanning Industry Association president, Pranee Kuruvelukorn, is proud of the industry's history in the Asian country. It has had a presence in dedicated production clusters in the province of Samutprakan in central Thailand since 1958. "It's 60 years now," she says, "but the history of the tanning industry in this country is more than 100 years old."

She explains that business people came from China in the early part of the twentieth century to begin making leather. There were buffalo and cattle locally, which farmers used as beasts of burden. The practice of using the animals for meat at the end of their working lives was well established; leather entrepreneurs realised they could also add value to the hides. Now the Thai leather industry is a sector that employs 55,000 people and is, counting finished leather products, bringing export revenues of around \$2.4 billion per year into the country.

"Consumption in the domestic market is growing," the association president adds. "Leather furniture is popular, for example, especially among wealthier people. When you go into a luxury condominium here you see a lot of leather." She describes the support the industry receives from the central government in Bangkok as good; the department of international trade promotion, which is part of the

The president of the Thai Tanning Industry Association, Pranee Kuruvelukorn, says leather is like cooking, with each part of the world having its preferred ingredients and traditional ways of preparing things. Thailand's is a recipe for success, she says.

ministry of commerce, helps the Thai Tanning Industry Association, and other private sector bodies, to participate in trade promotion activities, at home and overseas, including international trade fairs, trade missions and so on. She offers this example: "Every year we have good numbers at APLF in Hong Kong [20 tanners and 20 leathergoods brands make up the Thai contingent at the 2017 edition of APLF]. We've always regarded these exhibitions as a good opportunity for tanners from Thailand to show off their creations."

Still on the subject of exhibitions, she explains that, on home soil, the Bangkok International Fashion Fair and Bangkok International Leather Fair (BIFF & BIL) event is changing its dates from 2017 onwards, moving from March to October. The exact dates in October



have yet to be decided, but the exhibition continues to have the full support of the department of international trade promotion. Pranee Kuruvelukorn explains that the fair calendar in March is busy and that many younger people in the industry seem happy building contacts and promoting their merchandise using the internet and their smartphones. "Fairs may not be so important for young entrepreneurs," Ms Kuruvelukorn said, "but, having been involved in industry exhibitions for many years, I still believe they are a good opportunity for companies, for people to see business contacts face to face or just to catch up with friends in the industry." Other Thai Tanning Industry Association activities include organising leather seminars and workshops, allowing member companies and local designers to see and hear presentations from, for example, fashion industry leaders from Italy.

She says tanners in Thailand spend little time thinking about competition from rivals in the region, especially from China or Vietnam. "Leather is like cooking," she says. "Everyone has their own recipes, their own way of doing things. Everyone's recipe is different." She feels that in terms of international trade, relationships are what matter most of all. It's also her view that the mix of common and shared responsibilities among her member companies is healthy. Each company has to have its own strategy for boosting exports, for example, while tanners are working well together to run facilities such as common effluent treatment plants at the two main clusters; they are close to one another (one at Kilometre 30 and the other at Kilometre 34 on the road south from Bangkok) but run separate

effluent plants. These opened 40 years ago (with all the capital coming from the tanners), she explains, and still have plenty of capacity to cope. Tanners continue to pay to maintain and improve both common effluent treatment plants.

The area in which the tanners are located is going through major development at the moment. A high-speed train project, which is part of this, is expected to be completed before the end of 2018. With development, new people follow and sometimes newcomers to the area have complained about odour. Ms Kuruvelukorn explains that any unpleasant odour these new residents experience is from other industries, such as bone-processing and fish meal factories. "Leather manufacture has a unique odour," she says, "which is similar, whether you are in Italy or the US. We often invite groups of people from the area to come and see how we make leather. We let them experience the real thing for themselves. Otherwise, through misunderstanding, people can sometimes blame the leather industry for everything."

For similar reasons, there are regular outreach projects with local schools and colleges. One of these institutions, Samutprakan's centre for technical education, arranges work placements every year for students among the association's member companies, which the president welcomes warmly. "The college is well equipped and, although it does not offer a degree course, students do spend three years learning to become technicians. I welcome this because it is a way of bringing younger people into the industry," she says, "and they bring new ideas with them. It means we have a good future." 🌐

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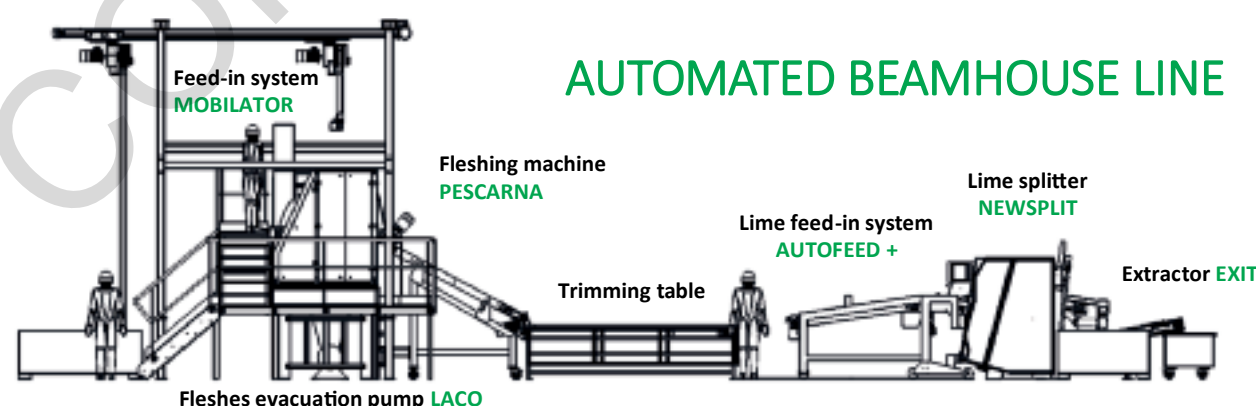
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