



A new challenge for the leather industry

Technical editor Mike Tomkin assesses the chemical standards that aim to standardise the industry but in some cases just add onerous processes and cost.

The industry has had to meet many challenges over the years with regard to chemicals. To date this has been relatively straightforward – with a few exceptions such as the Chrome VI story – but there are now so many third parties becoming involved that the answers, if indeed there are answers in some instances, are going to be extremely complex.

In response to the so called “Dirty Laundry” campaign launched by Greenpeace some six years ago, a number of brands got together to set up the Zero Discharge of Hazardous Chemicals Group (ZDHC). The campaign was aimed particularly at eliminating chemicals used by the apparel industries that are indestructible by natural means.

If we look at the problem of plastics in the oceans around the world, it is very easy to understand the concern that products which at best will take hundreds of years to break down could increase in concentration to a point where they could pose a similar problem. ZDHC now includes 23 brands, 33 value chain affiliates and 14 associate members, including some of the leather chemical suppliers.

ZDHC is working closely with the Leather Working Group to define sensible limits on chemicals used in leather processing. If this was the only initiative in place, it would mean everyone would be working to the same standard list and the solution should be relatively straightforward.

The initial focus for ZDHC was the textile industry and, whilst this was going on, brands outside the ZDHC, and some of those inside it, started to bring in outside

organisations to advise and provide forms of certification or approval for the chemicals used. Amongst those brought in were Oeko-Tex and Bluesign standards. They are among the best known but there are many more and the list continues to grow.

Each one in their own right is capable of helping to provide solutions but of course all providing a different one. Bearing in mind that some of the chemicals of concern might be used in the very early part of the process, a tanner would have to decide right at the start which hides and skins would be used for brands to meet their individual standards rather than the current wet blue or crust sortation. It is unimaginable how someone buying in wet blue would be able to handle this.

On top of all this, some brands, such as Inditex, a very big consumer of leather, have introduced their own systems where each individual chemical requires their approval before it can be used.

Another group of brands brought in Chem-IQ to do things in a different way. The brands are fully aware that they are under close scrutiny from interested parties and know that they have to be seen to be taking action. However, the situation does not improve if the solutions they come up with are too complex or too expensive for their supply chain. Surely it is a good time to seek a single solution; the joint work between the ZDHC and the LWG suppliers sub group could provided the ideal solution to the issue. 🌐



VF's garment manufacturing facility in Acanceh, Yucatan, Mexico, goes well beyond the standards set for wastewater disposal. Rather than returning the water used in the laundering process as-is, the used water goes through an intense purification process that leaves it cleaner than before, and clean enough to be restored into the aquifer from which it came, or to use in a variety of irrigation projects. CREDIT: VF CORPORATION

ZDHC

- Brands partners include Nike, Burberry, New Balance and adidas
- Established: 2011
- Included leather chemicals: 2015
- Leather Working Group helped adapt textiles list to leather

Chem-IQ

- VF Corp's standard. Brands include Timberland and Vans
- Established: 2014
- Developed in partnership with the University of Leeds (UK) and the University of Massachusetts Lowell (US)
- Cannot test for chrome VI in leather

Oeko-Tex

- Introduced by the Hohenstein Institute (Germany) and the Institute for Ecology, Technology and Innovation ÖTI (Austria)
- Established: 1992
- Included leather: 2016
- Leather products are tested for formaldehyde, heavy metals, pesticides, chlorinated phenols, PFOS, PFOA, as well as banned colourants
- Tanneries GL Bowron and Gerberei Hofbrucker, plus supermarket group Lidl are among first recipients of the leather standard

Bluesign

- Brand partners include Patagonia, Nike and Salomon
- Established: 2000
- Included leather: 2014
- Bluesign verifies compliance through an on-site inspection every three years



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