



A new way of importing New Zealand sheepskins

Technical editor Mike Tomkin examines how New Zealand-based tanner Lowe Corporation is working to address some of the challenges it faces as an exporter of sheepskins.

For several decades, tanners from around the world have been importing pickled sheepskins from New Zealand, a country where the supply of such skins far exceeds the demand from the domestic leather market. These wool sheepskins are widely used in the manufacture of clothing leathers.

Transporting the raw skins in the salted state with the wool still attached presents many challenges so, until now, the best method to bring the material from New Zealand has been as wool-free pickled skins. Although this established method has worked relatively well over the years, there is still room for improvement.

Pickled skins with their low pH and high salt content can be stored for a considerable amount of time, but if at any time they get wetter, the salt will be diluted and the skins will be damaged by the resultant acid swelling. These skins are also not completely resistant to mould, which can also damage them. Skins in the pickled state have not usually been degreased and have high salt content; both factors present challenges for the tannery receiving the skins, principally

related to the need for extra treatments and to effluent control. The fact that the skins are still damp means there is also extra transport cost due to the weight of the water in the skins.

Supply solution

For the past two years Lowe Corporation, one of the leading exporters of pickled pelts from New Zealand, has been working closely with Stahl to explore the possibility of supplying skins processed to the tanned stage using the leather chemicals manufacturer's EasyWhite Tan tanning system.

This offers many advantages over the pickling system. The skins are tanned and so are permanently preserved, which compares to the temporary preservation offered by pickling. This makes them much more resistant to any damage during transportation or while they are in storage. The skins are degreased at source so the tanner receiving them does not need to take care of this step. The salt content is also extremely low, so the skins do not place extra demands on the effluent treatment systems of those purchasing them. The



skins can be dried after tannage, allowing the weight for transportation to be considerably reduced, and they can be easily rewet, which means there is no drawback in subsequent processing.

The transportation of raw or semi-processed hides and skins often leads to the transfer of problems from the point of origin to the receiving tanner. Sometimes as little as 25% of the hide or skin ends up in the finished leather, so it surely makes sense to concentrate the earlier processing stages as close to the point of origin as possible. As well as not having to transport waste material, there is a better chance of finding outlets for the waste material at a single source where concentrations will be higher and where there will be no cross-contamination caused by bringing in semi-processed hides and skins from different sources.

No limits

One big advantage of pickled skins is that the receiving tannery still has plenty of flexibility in the post-pickling operations, which allows them to make their own individual leathers. If these skins are chrome tanned in New Zealand prior to export, the flexibility is greatly reduced, not only by the tannage itself but also because of the need for post-tanning operations to allow the skins to be dried out. Skins tanned with Stahl's EasyWhite Tan system can be rewet without any post-tannage treatment. This is not the case for chrome-tanned leather which requires some fatliquoring to allow the rewetting to take place.

If the receiving tanner still wants to make a chrome leather, this can be done using the EasyWhite Tan tanned skin. Alternatively, they can make chrome-free leathers if they so choose. In other words, the tanner can still make their own style of leather and is not limited by the treatment that the skins have already undergone.

Lowe Corporation is fully aware that it would be extremely difficult to develop the market for these tanned skins across its global markets without good local technical support in the receiving countries. It does not have the manpower to cover this alone; its close working relationship with Stahl means technicians in those countries are on standby to offer technical support as and when it is needed. ☺



The use of Stahl's EasyWhite Tan system in the early stages of processing does not restrict the options of tanners later on.

IMAGE: WTP

