



Here we go again

Animal right activists are back on the war path, at least in the Netherlands. Recent actions had nothing to do with the leather industry, but it is clear that the upstream part of our value chain, on which we depend for the supply of our raw materials, is extremely sensitive and open to criticism and attacks.

The objective of the attacks were pig farms, where activists illegally entered and created havoc. They maintained that animals were badly treated at the farm in question and showed several of the animals with wounds. The most striking thing was that the police assumed a strange position, that of wanting to negotiate between the owners of the farm and the activists. In my view there is nothing to negotiate if people violently invade your property. Even if these activists proclaim to be against the exploitation of animals as a matter of principle and hence will never have a positive word to say about any business connected to raising animals, except of course their pets, one can and must pre-empt them by creating conditions inside the farms that will stand up to public scrutiny.

The Dutch ministry of agriculture declared that the occupation was unacceptable; just because the activists did not agree with the farm's legal business activity, they did not have the right to disrupt it. The minister recognised that the farm provides food for people and should be allowed to continue doing that without undue interference from third parties with unsubstantiated claims. This is not an isolated case and I believe that, aside from the activists' ideology, with which I do not agree, there can be valid criticism. The industry from upstream to downstream must take a comprehensive constructive stance, not just looking at profit, and be able to meet public scrutiny. Law enforcement should not turn a blind eye to abuses that happen at farms and slaughterhouses. Operators, who deal daily with the animals, should not be insensitive to the animals they process "because it is just an animal". People adore their cats and dogs, but the same people take a totally different stance when they work inside a farm or slaughterhouse, not to mention the horrible conditions of animals being hauled onto ships for transport to other countries. They should be treated with the same consideration that domestic animals receive. Cats and dogs are caressed,

whereas slaughter animals can be hit, kicked and prodded with electrical devices as they go to their deaths. Proper animal treatment in farms and slaughter facilities is a matter of education and training.

The assault on farms and slaughterhouses is to be condemned, but it is up to the industry to pre-empt these actions. Even if we are downstream and have no active connection to what happens in farms and abattoirs, these are part of our value chain and we cannot turn a blind eye to abuse. You go to a restaurant and when you can see what is happening in the kitchen you feel reassured that your meals are being prepared in a proper way. In the same way, webcams at farms and slaughterhouses enable people to see that animals are treated properly. This also pushes operators to be correct and consistent. There will, of course, always be criticism that animals are being killed, that cannot be avoided, but you can eliminate a huge percentage of criticism by being open and transparent, showing you are doing things in a correct and proper way. Among the interesting books on this subject is one called *The Omnivore's Dilemma* by Michael Pollan. Worth reading.

Back to Bangladesh... and Zimbabwe

Back to Bangladesh where tanners have formed a company to manage the future upgraded common effluent treatment plant. That is in keeping with what happens at many effluent treatment plants around the world. The danger here is that, in a country like Bangladesh where corruption is not latent, that the management company will not be objective and will do the bidding of the tannery owners rather than implement the effluent treatment requirements and be objectively compliant with the country's environmental laws.

However, first the government must decide on the contract to transform the present, totally inadequate, plant into an efficient operation. It seems that the government has several proposals and needs to make a choice, together with the consulting team it has created for this purpose. The choices in the past were disastrous and mainly based on lining pockets than on the capabilities of the plant. Such a process is to be avoided at any cost if the plant is to work properly.



The government consultant is not an expert on effluent treatment and I wonder how he will be able to judge the proposals he receives. The results might meet the legal discharge requirements, but there is still the question of priorities; there are two important costs to be taken into consideration. The first is the cost of transforming the present plant into something much more efficient; the second cost is what it will take to run the plant day to day. The estimate today is that the plant in Dhaka, as it is now, would demand an operating cost of \$0.14 (€0.13) per square-foot (figures as high as \$0.40 have also been aired) of produced leather. The production cost of the Santa Croce Aquarno plant in Italy runs to €0.03 or €0.04 (\$0.03) per square-foot.

If the Savar tanneries produce 10 million square-feet of leather per month or 120 million square-feet per year, the operation cost of the present plant would amount to \$16.8 million, which is outrageous and would kill the competitiveness of the local leather industry. The same quantity produced in Italy has an effluent treatment cost of €6.6 million (\$7.34m). This means that if the plant upgrade costs somewhere around €25 million (\$27.8m) and brings the Savar common effluent treatment plant close to the efficiency levels of Santa Croce Aquarno, the difference in operating costs would give the Bangladeshi operators a payback time of less than four years. After that, the exploitation cost savings would become pure 'profit'.

Now to conclude with some great news from Zimbabwe:

they are going for a third country strategy for the leather sector in just 10 years and have engaged the precious collaboration of the geniuses of ALLPI, of course with copious overseas funding. Just to remind everybody that both previous strategies, also with the unforgettable collaboration of LLPI, have produced nothing. This new strategy will focus on how the machine set-up of Zimbabwean tanneries can be improved, repaired and upgraded. This was a topic that a study and strategy launched some 10 years ago addressed, too.

Italian tanning machinery manufacturers' association ASSOMAC offered at that time to send a team of technicians to verify which of the existing tannery machines could be repaired and to identify what spare parts were needed. Nothing happened. Now, 10 years later, the same machines that were repairable are either defunct or cannibalised to a point of being good only for the scrap yard. A new study will not repair the machines, but only indicate what it believes needs to be done; and, of course, everybody already knows that. No need for a new study. The new study will simply open endless new discussions, when the only thing needed is quick access to affordable loans, which in Zimbabwe does not exist because banks are charging 25% or 35% interest for low-risk companies, which in Zimbabwe do not exist. So here we have another exercise in keeping the development machine well-oiled and in funds to pay the drivers, the gardeners, cashier and, of course, the great travel and five-star hotel experiences. 🌐

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