



Leather and the circular economy



Leather uses renewable raw materials



Waste from other sectors (meat and dairy) is the input for making leather



The material is long-lasting



Leather products are eminently repairable



Leather is in keeping with sustainable consumption and sustainable production and, thus, supports the UN's Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)



Use of leather aids the battle against marine pollution, also part of the SDGs



The leather industry opens up pathways into the circular economy for companies of all sizes, including many thousands of small and medium enterprises



Leather content fulfils finished product manufacturers' desire to use recycled material



Finished products made from leather will meet criteria for green tax relief and for green procurement exercises



Leather manufacturing supports green employment commitments

Ten arguments that make clear leather's connection to the circular economy.

Credit: WTP/Flaticon

The law is an asset

There is no over-stating the importance of a new law protecting leather's identity that will come into force in Italy this October. Approved by the country's council of ministers at the end of May, a new decree on what manufacturers and brands can and cannot call leather was published in the government's official journal of record on June 26 and is now part of the laws of the land. Laws come into force 120 days after publication, which makes October 24 the date for the changes to take effect.

This will help leather win the recognition it deserves as an excellent example of the circular economy in action. It is a clear and obvious demonstration that human beings are capable of taking waste material and turning it into something useful, versatile, valuable and beautiful; we have been doing this for millennia. However, it is clear that some companies misuse the term 'leather' by applying it to synthetic substitutes; they are detracting from this noble effort to put waste to good use instead of putting it into landfill or allowing it to leak into our oceans.

These synthetic substitutes mostly contain plastic and, while leather uses renewable raw materials, most plastic does not. Leather consumes waste from the meat and dairy sectors, eliminating the need and expense of disposing of it; landfills are already full of plastic. The oceans are being choked by millions of tonnes of the material. Leather is long-

A new law protecting leather's identity will come into force in Italy this October. It will provide greater clarity for consumers and protect them from sellers of synthetics that seek to deceive them. It will also help make clearer the distinction between leather and plastic.

lasting and repairable; most plastic products are short-lived by design (their manufacturers build in obsolescence because they want you to throw products away quite quickly and buy new ones). Leather supports the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals for sustainable consumption and combatting marine pollution; plastic flies in the face of both. Nevertheless, the big-spending and hard-lobbying plastics industry is often very good at securing help from law-makers; credit where it is due. The European Commission's March 2020 Circular Economy Action Plan has a whole chapter devoted to advances that it wants to see take place with



plastic; it's one of seven "key product value chains" that the plan examines. Leather is, sadly, not among the other six. It is never been more important than it is now to highlight the differences between leather and plastic.

Upstream innovation

A more recent report called 'Breaking the Plastic Wave' came out in July 2020, the work of research organisation The Pew Charitable Trusts and environmental services company Systemiq, drawing on research by "thought partners" at the universities of Oxford and Leeds, the Ellen MacArthur Foundation and Bristol-based research and campaign group Common Seas. This report's critical findings include the contention that, without urgent action, the annual flow of plastic waste into the ocean will nearly triple by 2040 to 29 million tonnes per year, the equivalent to 50 kilos of plastic for every metre of coastline throughout the world. It says current government and industry commitments could bring about a reduction in plastic leakage of, perhaps, 7%, but this is not enough. It takes as its starting point the volume of plastic pollution that leaked into the oceans of the world from land in 2016, 11 million tonnes (adding to the volume that was already there, which it puts at 150 million tonnes). That year, there were 335 million tonnes of plastic produced globally (not all of it has come within the scope of the report because not all of it was "prone to leaking"). "Achieving the vision of near-zero ocean plastic pollution will require technological advances, new business models, significant spending, and, most crucially, accelerating upstream innovation," the report says.

Plastic recycling has its limits

Brands, including some that use some leather but could use a lot more, are talking loudly about recycled plastic. In its Circular Economy Action Plan, the European Commission talks about increasing the uptake of recycled plastics. It says



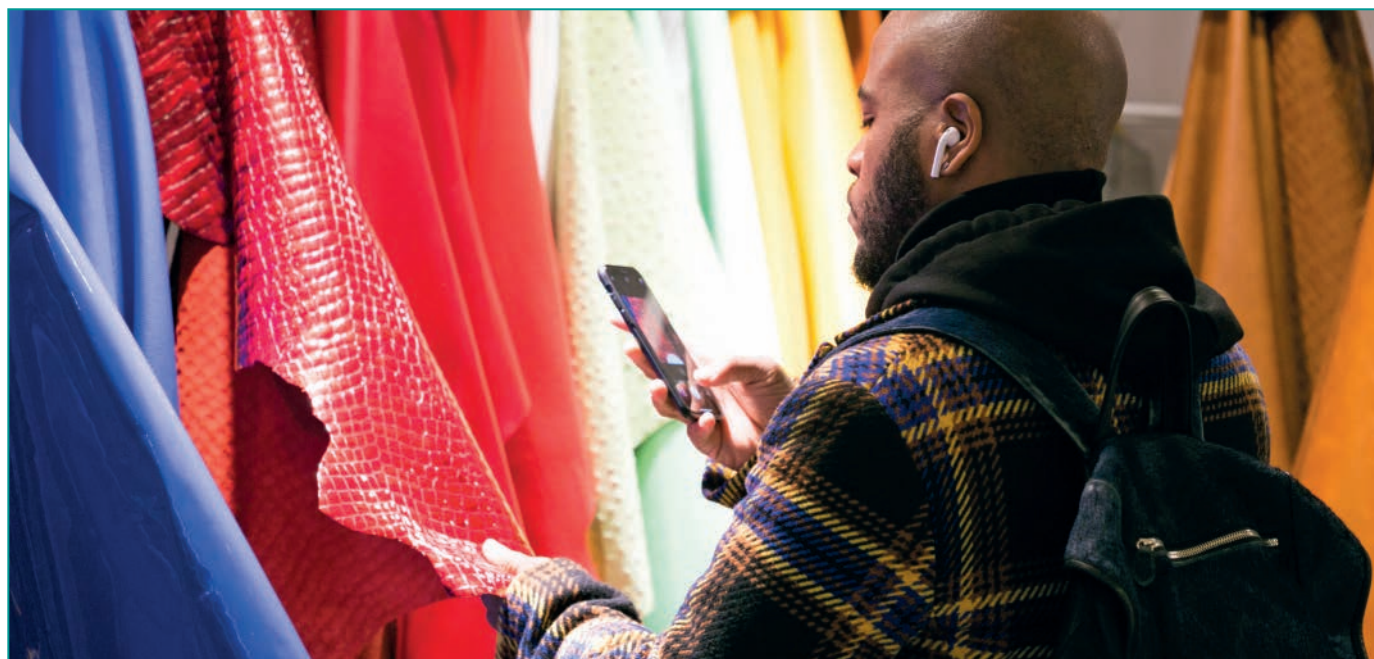
Italian politicians leaving a council of ministers meeting in the Palazzo Chigi in Rome in June. Credit: Italian Government

the Commission will propose mandatory requirements for recycled content in a range of plastic products. All very commendable, although of course the Commission is not proposing the recycling of plastic as a panacea. This is just as well because, according to 'Breaking the Plastic Wave', even if governments invested billions in plastic recycling initiatives and technologies between now and 2040, it would still lead to 18 million tonnes of plastic flowing from land to sea in 2040, 65% more than in 2016.

The report argues that scaling up recycling of plastic is "critically important", but says it is neither affordable nor feasible to recycle all plastic. Today, 21% of all plastic is suitable for what it calls economical mechanical recycling. The report's authors believe that increasing this figure to 54% would be possible, if unlikely. Not all of that 54% would make



The volume of plastic in the oceans could triple by 2040 unless we take action now. That action should involve recycling more plastic, making fewer plastic products to start with and replacing plastic with other materials in some applications. This could open up yet more opportunities for leather. Credit: NPDSStock/Shutterstock



it to recycling centres because of “losses and infrastructure constraints”, but the authors are confident 33% of all plastic could be mechanically recycled. In addition, they estimate that a further 6% could make it into chemical recycling flows. That still means more than 60% of plastic will continue to evade recycling.

Substitute for the substitute

According to ‘Breaking the Plastic Wave’, it will also be necessary to reduce the volumes of plastic products that we make (by encouraging people to consume fewer products made from plastic) and, in parallel, to use materials other than plastic in certain products that people do still want to buy. Not all of these will open up possibilities for leather, but some will and the leather industry needs to be on its toes, ready to tell the whole of its long, rich story and take its share of the spoils. In applications in which plastic has substituted leather in recent years, we can argue coherently that leather could now reclaim some ground and become a substitute for the substitute. It ought to become much more difficult than it is today for finished product companies to ignore leather and justify their use of the huge volume of plastic they are putting into footwear, upholstery, bags and so on.

The report estimates that it should be possible to replace with more circular materials around 16% of the 29 million tonnes of plastic waste that will flow into the ocean in 2040 if we stick to business as usual. This is the same as saying that if governments, brands and consumers want to bring that figure of 29 million tonnes down, they have to choose alternatives to plastic some of the time. This projection suggests a demand for almost 5 million tonnes of those alternative materials. Leather must be able to claim a share of that volume. The report says that these upstream solutions for reducing plastic production and substituting it are also “critical”, but that they must be “scaled carefully to limit unintended social or environmental consequences”.

There are critics and opponents of leather who might argue that this reference to “social and environmental consequences” should exclude leather from being part of the solution. They are not correct, but they are vocal and visible.

Italian leather catches a designer's eye. The country's new leather law will help consumers trust and understand information from tanners, designers and brands. Credit: Lineapelle

This means that the leather sector's efforts to affirm its credentials as a sustainable, circular industry and to keep up its efforts to become even greener and even cleaner must continue. Everyone knows this work is far from easy but one distinct advantage the leather industry has is that it does not have to hide any of the facts about what it does. It does not have to paint a false picture of its circular credentials. All it needs to do is tell the truth about itself.

Shout about it

This brings us back to Italy's new leather law. Tanners and finished leather product manufacturers have long highlighted the authenticity of their wares. Brands that use leather shout about it; it is one of the main ways in which they seek to convince consumers that it's worth paying a higher price for the products on offer. No matter what leather's opponents may argue, the material has prestige and the power to enhance the appeal of practically any product. This is why companies that use plastic instead often deliberately misuse the term ‘leather’, an attempt to make consumers think their products are of higher quality than they really are. Others avoid leather for the same reason they avoid wool, silk and collagen-enhanced shampoo: they use their freedom of choice to consume no products of animal origin. To apply the term ‘leather’ to some of the materials or finished products aimed at this market is slightly baffling, but must be an attempt to convince buyers that that the materials they have used in shoes, bags, jackets and car interiors have the same performance properties as leather.

If this comparison holds true, fine. The companies responsible would have found a new miracle material that offers all the benefits of leather (beauty, durability, longevity, reparability, naturalness, sensuality, breathability, versatility, waste-consuming and so on) without being of animal origin. There would be a market for that material and it would

probably have a far-reaching promotional campaign and a catchy product name dreamed up by a Fifth Avenue marketing consultancy. The name would be unlikely to include the word 'leather' because these brands want to move away from any association with a product of animal origin; it could put off people in their target audience. But if the comparison does not hold true and the substitute material cannot match the properties of leather, it is grossly unfair and misleading to consumers to use that term.

Extraordinary achievement

Italy's legislators make it perfectly clear that this is the new law's aim, to make the market fairer for consumers. The text reads: "This decree contains provisions relating to the definition and use of the term 'leather' ... and to the labelling of materials and the products made from them in any presentation and communication, including in electronic media, in order to provide the consumer with correct information." Other governments, including those of France, Spain, Germany, Austria, the US, Brazil, China, Belgium and Lithuania, have laws in place to do this too. Others, including Hungary and Portugal, are working towards adding legislation of their own.

The addition of Italy is important, though. As Andreas Kindermann, current president of the leather industry's main representative body in the European Union, COTANCE, says elsewhere in this issue of *World Leather*, Italy is the most

important leather-manufacturing country in Europe. It is not just that there are 1,200 companies in Italy linked to the tanning industry; it is also that the leather they make sets trends for much of the rest of the world and satisfies the demands of the biggest names in the luxury sector. At the same time, Italy is home to a large number of leather chemicals and tanning machinery developers and is, therefore, an important centre of innovation. This means the new law that will come into force in October will protect a large number of companies and apply to a huge volume of leather. COTANCE secretary general, Gustavo González-Quijano, has called the new law "an extraordinary achievement", paying tribute to the Italian national tanning industry association, UNIC, for the hard work it put into securing political support for its arguments and bringing about this result. He says it is not enough to hope that other countries might follow suit; UNIC fought hard for this and leather industry representatives elsewhere have to fight the way UNIC fought to convince people in authority in their countries that leather is worth protecting.

Those efforts could bring rich rewards because the world is crying out for alternatives to plastic, as 'Breaking the Plastic Wave' makes clear. Leather can help fill the gap. The renewable raw material, the skilled workers, the improved chemicals, the theory, the knowledge, the practice, the production capacity, the testing regimes and the desire are all in place already. 🌱



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