



## 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

CREDIT: WTP/FLATICON

# Leather industry answers back

In a rare but welcome display of unity, the global leather industry joined forces in October and formally asked the Sustainable Apparel Coalition (SAC) to suspend the dismal score the nonprofit organisation applies to leather in its Higg Materials Sustainability Index (MSI). It turned this request down, but there are hopes across the leather sector of ongoing dialogue and changes in the future. Launched in 2012, the Higg Index aims to help brands, retailers and manufacturers assess the sustainability of materials for use in footwear, garments and other consumer products. The SAC released an updated version of the index in August this year.

Leading leather industry bodies, including the International Council of Tanners, the International Union of Leather Technologists' and Chemists' Societies, The Leather and Hide Council of America (LHCA), and leather's representative bodies in the European Union (COTANCE), Brazil (CICB) and China (CLIA) reviewed the August update of the MSI and concluded that it treats leather unfairly. They sent a joint-letter to the SAC to request that it suspend leather's MSI score pending reviews of the methodologies and data it uses.

### Out of date and unrepresentative

In the letter, the secretary of the International Council of Tanners, Dr Kerry Senior, said the leather industry recognises

*A row over the treatment of leather in the Higg Materials Sustainability Index has had two potentially positive consequences. A broader dialogue between senior industry representatives and the organisation behind the index is under way. Perhaps even more importantly, the global leather industry is more united than ever.*

the need for assessment of the environmental impacts of products. He added that the industry remains committed to dialogue with the SAC and would work with the organisation to make its assessment of leather fairer and more accurate, but he said senior representatives of the global leather sector were in no doubt that the use of "inappropriate methodologies" and "out-of-date, unrepresentative, inaccurate and incomplete data" had led to leather being

burdened with a disproportionately high Higg Index score.

“This has led to a negative perception of leather that does not reflect its sustainable, circular nature,” Dr Senior said. “On the basis of the current Higg score, manufacturers are deselecting leather in favour of fossil fuel-derived, unsustainable synthetic products. We believe that the reputation and viability of leather and leather manufacturers are being unfairly damaged by an assessment that does not reflect the true nature of leather or, indeed, the alternatives.”

Concerns that leather-sector bodies raise in the letter include the MSI’s use of old, inaccurate data, a narrow geographical focus, misconceptions about the raw materials tanners use, and a reluctance to take into account the durability and longevity of leather in assessing its environmental impact.

“More troubling is the lack of transparency on the basis for the score and the lack of engagement with the wider leather industry to ensure that the data is accurate,” the letter says.

#### A response, of sorts

The president of LHCA, Stephen Sothmann, sent the letter to the Oakland-based SAC in advance of making the text public, but received no reaction. When the joint-letter did become public on October 8, there was still no immediate response from the SAC. A week later, leather industry figures became aware from posts on LinkedIn that the SAC had published an entry on its in-house blog in which it sets out a response of sorts to the leather industry. There was no phone call or email to any of the representatives of the leather sector; no direct response of any kind. Just the blog entry.

The reaction this has provoked is one of disappointment, with the suggestion that it bodes ill for the chances of success in future dialogue with the SAC. But, on the other hand, at least there has been an answer. Bodies representing other natural materials, notably wool and alpaca fibre, have also complained to the SAC about the scores their products receive in the Higg MSI and appear to have been ignored completely.

In its response, the SAC addresses the final point in the leather industry letter first. It says transparency is “paramount” to its work. It also says: “We welcome an open dialogue with



*There is a consensus in the industry that the Higg Index does not reflect leather’s sustainable, circular nature.*

CREDIT: WTP/PRIMEASIA

industry partners, such as the International Council of Tanners, to ensure that our tools reflect the most current science.” It makes it clear, though, that it has no intention of acquiescing to the leather industry’s main request: it will not suspend the score for leather at this time. After its August update, the Higg MSI apportions an impact-per-kilo score to bovine leather that is worse than those for polyester, spandex, acrylic, viscose, nylon and polyurethane (PU). It specifically states that leather’s impact is almost three times greater than that of PU used as a synthetic substitute for leather. Supporting an opinion that is widespread among senior leather industry commentators that there is a clear bias in the Higg MSI against natural materials in general, silk, wool, cotton and alpaca fibre all fare far worse than fossil-fuel based alternatives. In contrast, polyester’s impact has gone down from 44 to 36.

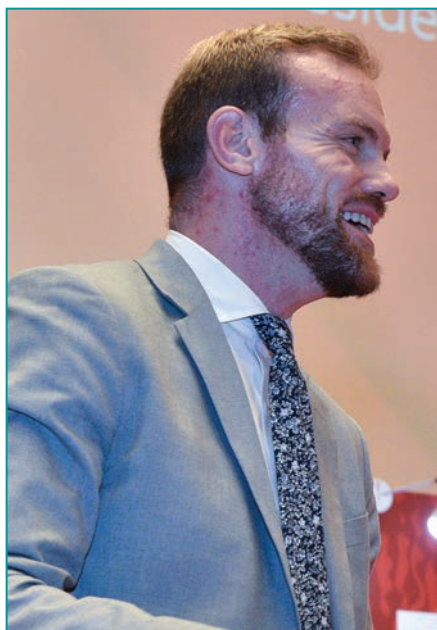
#### Criticisms accepted

“The Higg MSI data is updated twice a year,” the SAC blog entry reveals, “to include new and updated data submissions to reflect best-available information. We are not planning to suspend the score for leather at this

time but look forward to improving the tools over time. The SAC regularly engages with industry partners and invites them to submit new and updated lifecycle assessment (LCA) data.” It accepts some of the leather industry’s specific criticisms, though. The open letter said the Higg MSI only takes Brazilian and US cattle herds into account and, therefore, does not reflect “the varying impacts of the different farming methods used in the rest of the world”.

One obvious consequence of this is that the Higg assumes the lifespan of cattle to be five years and it calculates five years’ worth of impact for the animals, exacerbating leather’s score. Leaving aside the upstream carbon footprint and system expansion debate, the letter simply points out that the lifespan of a typical beef animal is usually between 12 and 36 months. Therefore, the apparent impact under the Higg Index is “significantly larger” than it ought to be.

The SAC agrees that it would be beneficial to have “more geographical coverage” to reflect farming methods in different regions. With regard to the lifespan of the animals, it says: “We have already identified this as an assumption that we will be requesting Sphera to



*Stephen Sothmann, president of the LHCA, and Dr Kerry Senior, secretary of the International Council of Tanners, have led the leather industry to new-found unity.*

CREDIT: WTP/LEATHER UK

update for this dataset.” Sphera is the provider of a cloud-based risk management platform that SAC uses to accumulate data. Cutting through the consultancy-speak, it sounds as though it accepts its five-year assumption to be wrong and that it may change it at some point in the future.

Another criticism of the Higg Index is that its focus is limited to a cradle-to-gate analysis. In other words, it only examines the environmental impact of producing materials and does not take into account that material’s use, its durability and its end-of-life possibilities. In the blog entry, the SAC’s response to this is that it does not claim that the Higg can provide a complete picture for any material. “It does not replace other sourcing considerations, nor does it claim to,” it says. It points out that there is a second tool in its own suite, the Higg Product Module (Higg PM). A second edition of the Higg PM is due next year; the SAC says this new version will include “consideration of use and end-of-life”.

### Keep talking

The SAC places great store in a dialogue it has been conducting for several years with multi-stakeholder body the Leather Working Group and says it wants to use this to identify “credible data sources” that it can use to update its information in future versions. It is likely that following the

October 2020 interaction, the leather industry will seek to broaden the representation it has in this ongoing conversation. A likely next step is that a small, expert-led technical working group will form and seek to pick up the thread of the SAC-Leather Working Group dialogue.

The Global Leather Coordinating Committee (GLCC), consisting of key representatives of the leather sector’s three main international organisations – the International Council of Tanners, the International Council of Hide Skin & Leather Traders Associations and the International Union of Leather Technologists and Chemists Societies – will have oversight of this work, with its efforts fronted by the International Council of Tanners.

Leather’s representatives have said they want this ongoing discussion to be public and for the SAC to be publicly accountable for progress, or any lack of progress, in the areas that need improving. There are fears that the SAC may feel it has already done enough to put the industry’s complaints to bed and that it has seen off the uncomfortable reaction of those representing leather and other natural materials to its August update. The calls for change, from the leather industry at least, will continue.

For a long time, one of the most frequent criticisms of the leather industry has been that it lacks a powerful, single voice because it lacks unity. If nothing else, this row over the Higg Index’s unfair treatment of leather has engendered a seldom-seen spirit of shared concern and commitment to common action. 🌱



*Low-impact materials in a canal in India.*

CREDIT: SHUTTERSTOCK