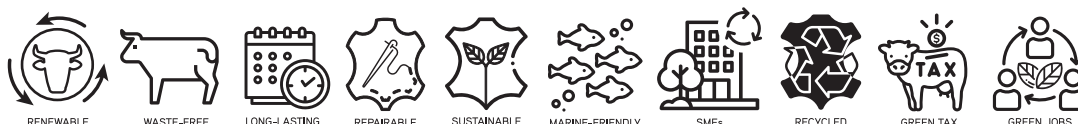




Leather is a perfect example of the fight against waste.

CREDIT: PHILÉMON D'ANDURAIN

## Standards are on the way



We have mentioned on these pages before that the leather industry has the duty to spell out its circular economy credentials because most of the conferences and policy strategies that cover this issue have not yet made the connection. Many industries are attempting to attach themselves to the circular economy phenomenon. A cursory glance at LinkedIn this October revealed that operators in oil and gas, paper, electronics, cement, batteries, plastics, engineering, synthetic fibres and many others were all seeking to recruit circular economy experts or advocates of one kind or another.

This can hardly come as a surprise if we remind ourselves that the European Commission recently promised that projects that meet its sustainability requirements can claim a share of €750 billion of new funding that it has announced as part of a recovery plan to mitigate the impacts of the covid-19 pandemic. This is in addition to funding plans that were already in place. The Commission says “total financial firepower” of €1.85 trillion will now be available to help put its programmes into practice.

*An initiative by French standards body Afnor has led to the possibility of new ISO standards on the circular economy. An ISO technical committee is already hard at work on this.*

Money talks, and it is no surprise that projects are mushrooming across all industry sectors to try to claim a share of this funding. It was equally predictable that debate would soon begin over definitions of what is and is not part of the circular economy. There may be no formal definition yet (*World Leather's* ten criteria are implicit but not explicit in the European Commission documentation), but France's national standardisation, certification and training organisation, Afnor, has been contemplating precisely this question since 2018. Afnor has come up with a norm, XP X30-901, that may help frame the debate. Its

contents may soon become much more international and much better known.

### Clearer definitions

Afnor strategy co-ordinator for the circular economy, Anne Benady, explains that the organisation works with stakeholders in the private and the public sectors. Upon noticing that “a plethora of projects” had sprung up, it saw the need to try to formulate a clearer definition. She says her aim is always to make things as simple as possible, without missing out any key detail.

With this in mind, she suggests: “The circular economy is the opposite of the linear economy, which is the system we’ve all grown up with. The linear economy is very simple: we extract resources, we transform them, consume them and then we throw them away. The idea behind the circular economy is not to generate any waste, to close the loop for production and for consumption. Another, more academic definition could be to say that the circular economy is a change-system and a production set-up that aims to use resources in the most efficient way possible, minimise impact on the environment and improve people’s wellbeing.”

### International scope

What Afnor produced two years ago is a project management document, produced as a result of its work with around 50 organisations, that aims to help companies manage circular economy projects well. It works in a similar way to classic system management standards, such as ISO 9001 for quality and ISO 14000 for environmental management, and is based on the principle of continuous improvement. Afnor is ISO’s member organisation for France.

In a fine example of circular thinking, Afnor has fed its work on XP X30-901 back into ISO to ask it to consider turning it into new international standards. “The circular economy goes beyond our borders,” Ms Benady says. “We approached ISO in 2019 and the response from the more than 80 member countries was really enthusiastic.” ISO now has a technical committee (TC) devoted to this work, TC 323. Afnor serves as the committee’s secretariat and has presented its document and its definitions as a basis for the committee’s work. A total of four ISO standards are now under development. These will govern questions such as how to measure circularity, purchasing, what training will be required, the territorial boundaries of circular projects and so on.

### From linear to circular

“This will provide organisations, states and companies with a whole suite of tools and these will help them put the transition from linear to circular in place,” Ms Benady continues. “All types of company are welcome to join in and stand up for their own proposals for what constitutes circular economy activities and give representation to everyone involved in their sphere of activity.”

Her organisation is already providing training and a “diagnostic service” for companies that want to be part of this. “This can help businesses see the state of play,” she says, “and make their employees aware of what’s going on. After that, it can be a good idea to have people engage in a small project, such as a specific product development. Big projects are possible too.”

*Afnor’s strategy co-ordinator for the circular economy, Anne Benady.*

*CREDIT: CNC-P&M*



### Leather is a perfect example

Fast movers among the industries taking part already in TC323 are diverse and include paper and cardboard, aerospace, construction, concrete and finance. Leather is not there. However, Anne Benady has confirmed that a group of luxury and fashion companies have already taken their first steps along this road.

“We held an exploratory meeting just before lockdown,” she explains. “We wanted to learn everything we could about luxury brands’ needs and find out how standards can help them create products that are more sustainable and responsible.” A proposal has already emerged from this, for a project at international level to define sustainability criteria with a view to making it easier for companies to give transparent information to consumers about how environmentally responsible a particular product is.

“The work we have done so far has taken a generalist view,” she concludes, “but we have already decided that the luxury and fashion sector should have an industry-specific definition of what circular economy means. Part of that will be a more precise focus on product origin. We often hear that products are ‘made in ...’ somewhere, but how do we define and control that? This too is an important aspect of keeping the consumer informed.”

Ms Benady explains that XP X30-901 lays out seven practical actions that companies can focus on to go from linear to circular. “Some of these are well known,” she says, “although there is a possibility that they can seem to reduce the circular economy to waste-management, recycling or, sometimes upcycling. There is also sustainable sourcing, which means minimising your impact through your sourcing choices. Using up resources as much as you can to minimise waste is also a part of that. It seems to me that leather is a perfect example of this, of the fight against waste.” 🌱

*Anne Benady took part in the Sustainable Leather Forum in Paris in September 2020. The event was organised by the Conseil National du Cuir with the support of France’s Ministry of the Economy, Finance and the Recovery.*