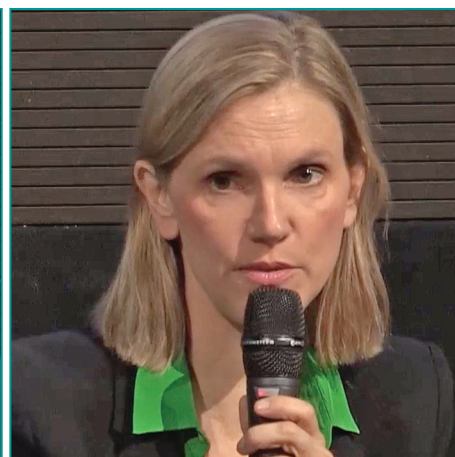




Anna Athanasopoulou, European Commission head of emerging and creative industries.



Frank Boehly, Conseil National du Cuir president.



Agnès Pannier-Runacher, Secretary of State for the Economy and Finance, France.

ALL CREDITS: SUSTAINABLE LEATHER FORUM

Companies must step up



RENEWABLE



WASTE-FREE



SUSTAINABLE



GREEN TAX



GREEN JOBS

The first Sustainable Leather Forum opened with a clear message from the president of industry body the Conseil National du Cuir, Frank Boehly, who told the audience: “The aim today is to talk about our companies, the companies in the leather supply chain. Leather is the oldest example there is of recycling and upcycling. We take hides and skins and make this wonderful material, leather, that can then be used to make countless finished products.” Conveying this simple fact to a sometimes confused, sometimes cynical general public is hard work though, especially for the small or medium companies that dominate the industry.

And yet, the head of the European Commission’s emerging and creative industries, Anna Athanasopoulou, said at the event that Europe’s textile, leather and fashion companies, including its many small and medium enterprises, are “at the forefront of the transition to more sustainable modes of production and consumption”.

Ms Athanasopoulou said there is an opportunity to further enhance European competitiveness by continuing to go down this route. She said the new European Commission that is just beginning work following elections earlier this year, will introduce new measures in the coming months as part of a wider initiative it is calling the European Green Deal.

Size does not matter

France’s secretary of state for the economy and finance, Agnès Pannier-Runacher, is of the view that it is up to companies of all sizes in the leather value chain to find ways of convincing consumers that leather is good. She used the occasion to call on more fashion and luxury companies to sign up to the Fashion Pact that an initial 32 companies signed in August at the G7 meeting in Biarritz. Signatory companies have committed to setting science-based targets that will help them combat global warming, restore biodiversity and natural ecosystems, and protect the oceans. Ms Pannier-Runacher said: “It’s not governments that are driving this

France’s main leather industry association, the Conseil National du Cuir, successfully organised the first Sustainable Leather Forum in Paris in the autumn. An audience of leather industry professionals, designers and senior representatives from luxury leathergoods brands gathered to hear talks covering developments in sustainability across the whole of the leather supply chain, from livestock farming to finished products.

change, but consumers, and it’s companies that have to find the solutions. Government’s role is to accompany businesses as they try to respond, to try to give them time to make the changes they have to make.” A former director of automotive supplier Faurecia, the minister said: “I don’t like it when people present economy and ecology as being at odds.”

Chase the waste away

As everyone who has had even brief exposure to the just-in-time thinking that has dominated the automotive supply chain for decades, reducing waste is one of several points on which economy and ecology converge. Luxury leathergoods brand Hermès offered an example of this, telling delegates it is now consuming less leather to make its handbags and other



Emmanuel Pommier, Hermès managing director for artisan leathers and saddlery.



Rafael Andrade, international strategy consultant, CICB.



Professor Grahame Webb, president of the Crocodile Specialist Group.

products thanks to innovations it has incorporated into its production set-up. Hermès's managing director for artisan leathers and saddlery, Emmanuel Pommier, said that the company's use of digital cutting systems and other advanced technology has allowed it to use 11% less leather to make the same volume of products. But he added: "We remain absolutely committed to this material that has made our business what it is." He went on to say that leather has a positive future, describing it as "a starting point for the circular economy".

Pleas for the planet

The ongoing and important war on waste has commanded less attention in recent months than other factors that are more obvious contributors to the climate crisis. A consultant working on international strategy, design and planning with Brazil's main tanning industry body, CICB, said that coming to Europe to speak at the Sustainable Leather Forum was "a challenge". This remark, from Rafael Andrade, follows announcements from a number of prominent North American and European brands, including VF Corporation, that they will stop placing orders for Brazilian leather until traceability systems improve. They have reacted to renewed publicity about deforestation in Amazon regions and their decisions have come in spite of some tanneries in Brazil achieving the Brazilian Leather Certification of Sustainability (CSCB) that CICB set up in 2012. In 2018, three tanneries completed the certification programme, followed by a fourth in 2019; around 20 others are currently working to achieve certification.

In response to a question from *World Leather* at the Paris forum, Mr Andrade said it was "frustrating" that CSCB, which addresses detailed criteria covering four "dimensions of sustainability" (sustainability management, as well as economic, environmental and social aspects) has not been enough to stay the hands of VF Corporation and other consumer products groups. However, he said the short-term pain of these brands' announcements could bring positive developments, too. "It will provoke movement among tanners," he said. "I told them years ago that they had to take action because, if they think sustainability is hard now, it's only going to become more difficult. They can see now that this statement was correct and now they know they have to take action."

Tolerance, respect and exotic leather

Bovine leather is the focus of the Amazon outcry, owing to cattle farmers using some of the cleared land in the exotic setting of the rainforest, but the subject of exotic leather, of which French and Italian luxury brands are the most important buyers, also came up. The president of a group that advises the International Union for Conservation of Nature on crocodile conservation told the audience in Paris that, contrary to popular perception, the use of exotic leather in the high-end fashion industry drives conservation.

This group, the Crocodile Specialist Group, has 650 members in 64 countries and works on projects involving 26 different species in 99 countries. Its president, Professor Grahame Webb, told the forum that demand for crocodile skins for use in luxury leathers is good for conservation. Professor Webb has published hundreds of academic papers and a number of books. He also has held appointments at the University of Sydney, the University of New South Wales and Charles Darwin University in Australia's Northern Territory.

In Paris, he said: "It may seem counter-intuitive, but it's true: the use of exotic skins in fashion is a powerful tool in conservation. Leather drives conservation." He explained that in Australia's Northern Territory there are only 250,000 people and around 100,000 crocodiles. He pointed out that the relationship between the human and crocodile populations has passed through a number of different phases. In 1971, for example, a policy of eliminating the reptiles at any opportunity because of the danger they represented reduced the total number of crocodiles in the state to 1% of the 1935 level of around 100,000; strict protection measures came in.

Within 10 years, the crocodile population had grown again to previous levels and, once again, presented a risk to humans, so culling began and the population levelled out at 100,000 animals in 2015. "Our conclusion from this experience is that we need a sustainable wildlife economy that benefits people," Professor Webb said, he stated that 30% of people in Northern Territory are aboriginal Australians. Projects that help conserve the crocodile population across the state are now bringing important economic benefits to communities of aboriginal people, providing the right balance. "Tolerance, respect and understanding of all people, cultures and traditions are what we need to drive conservation," he concluded. 🌱