

*Open-pit quarry.**CREDIT: BRASILLAO/SHUTTERSTOCK*

DEFENDING CHROME

The third 'Leather - From Beast to Beauty' conference, organised by *World Leather* and specialist training consultancy *Leather Wise*, took place in London in June. Participants included experts from all segments of the leather industry covering raw material through to finished products. The main focus of the presentations, however, was on producing leather in a more sustainable way. One of the speakers was Dr Dietrich Tegtmeier, vice-president of product development and product application for specialty chemicals provider *Lanxess*, who spoke on the contribution companies like his can make to the ongoing drive among tanners to make the leather industry more sustainable. He told the conference that greener chemicals were coming on to the market and, by green, he meant chemical products that are safer to handle and more efficient in producing the result expected of them during the tanning process. They also produce less waste, have a lower energy footprint, offer higher levels of biodegradability and recyclability, and use a higher proportion of natural raw materials in their composition.

Fatliquors, reactive tannins, some retanning agents, polyurethane finishes and some dyestuffs are good examples of products that chemical manufacturers believe



Dr Dietrich Tegtmeier of Lanxess says the chemical industry must take the lead in helping the leather industry reduce its environmental impact. *CREDIT: WTP*

have the potential to be made in a greener way. Dr Tegtmeier observed that approximately 70% of Lanxess's research and development budget was devoted to helping its customers to become more sustainable.

He also expressed strong views regarding the ongoing debate over the relative green credentials of chrome and vegetable tanning agents. "We have to be careful in rushing to judge," he says. "All the alternatives have their own advantages and disadvantages but I think it is wrong to say that, from an eco perspective, vegetable tanning must be the best and chrome tanning the worst. For example, chrome is so effective that tanners can use it in much smaller quantities. You need to use a lot more volume of vegetable tannage to produce the leather. That's important."

He also said that about 80% of all chemical products used in the tanning process are not present in the finished leather, meaning they have become waste material. Obviously, something has to be done with this residue and currently as much as possible is either reused in some way or recycled. A better solution he insists would be to use less of the chemicals in the first place. Furthermore, in response to the frequent criticism on the use of chrome as a tanning agent because it is a metal, Dr Tegtmeier pointed out that less than 5% of all the chrome in industrial use globally goes into leather. 95% of it goes into steel and steel is recycled as everybody knows. "Chrome is the most recycled element in the chemical Periodic Table."

ECO POTENTIAL

He also believes that leather has the potential to be 'a true eco-product' if tanneries go about making it in what he regards as the right way. Many tanneries are already on that road and many more are starting out, carrying out environmental audits, taking part in initiatives such as Tannery of the Year, the Leather Working Group and so on. The raw material (the beast, in the context of the conference) is 100% renewable and, in fact, turning hides and skins into a useful, flexible, durable and beautiful substrate does the meat industry a massive favour because, otherwise, many of the

millions of hides abattoirs are left with after processing animal carcasses would have to go into landfill.

Lanxess estimates that while the global leather market has an annual value of around \$50 billion, tanneries are very often relatively small operations that are "squeezed in the manufacturing chain by giants". They have limited resources for research and development and, for much of the time, focus instead on the quality of the leather they produce. For this reason, he accepts that it is his area of business, the chemicals industry that must take the lead in making leather greener, although he would like to see more of the brands that use large quantities of leather lend a hand. All stakeholders should find a way to support "efficient scientific innovation", he concludes and to improve the environmental standards of leather production. 🌱



Just Add Leather

You supply the craftsmanship, A&E will supply the high performance threads, such as Anefil Nylon® and Anefil Poly®. Introducing Anefil Nylon® DRY, our new technically advanced non-wick sewing thread, which provides exceptional quality and enhanced sewability. Whether it is for footwear, sporting and recreational products or any sewn product demanding quality, A&E has the thread for you.

www.amefird.com


