



Businesses that benefit from the meat animals produce must include the greenhouse emissions they also produce in their carbon footprint calculations.

CREDIT: SHUTTERSTOCK / HEATH JOHNSON

Going for green

The footwear industry, like any other, is merely part of a chain stretching from basic raw material to final user. The leather it widely uses as an upper material starts out with the farmer and runs through the meat packer and the tanner before finally reaching the shoe maker. Anything affecting the farmer who grows the initial animal, the abattoir that slaughters it for meat and the tanner who converts the hide from a by-product to a usable commodity therefore also affects the shoe maker and, ultimately, the consumer.

COTANCE (European Confederation of the Leather Industry) has fought hard on behalf of the leather industry on the question of carbon footprint. Negotiating with the European Commission (EC) and other industries as part of a pilot project it has proved

hard work. The prize sought is official recognition of leather as a 'green' product. If this can be achieved, there are positive consequences for the leather and footwear industry as a whole.

Debate continues about how much—if any—of the upstream carbon footprint of its raw material the leather industry should take responsibility for when assessing its own impact on the environment. London-based life cycle analysis consultancy Trucost suggests between 8% and 10% from cattle. This is broadly in keeping with figures quoted by some prominent tanning groups, including PrimeAsia, as to the possible proportion of the economic value of a cow that can be attributed to the hide.

This works for many companies in the face of the intense negotiation with customers over price and volume. Some

of these, particularly those producing athletic footwear, have shown in recent years that they require little persuasion to substitute cheaper synthetic materials instead. However, there have also been occasions where carbon footprint has been used as an excuse for using less leather, suggesting to consumers that their shoes no longer contain leather because leather, meat and cows are all bad for the environment. Regrettably, it usually goes unsaid that the synthetic substitutes used often have a much greater impact on the environment.

In this context, it seems clear to *World Footwear* that even companies that accept 7%, 8%, 9% or even 10% of the carbon footprint of the cow as part of the carbon footprint of the finished leather, often do so to be politic and to avoid upsetting or even driving away

sensitive customers, rather than out of a conviction that tanners have responsibility for part of these greenhouse gas emissions. Anything for a quiet life.

POSITIVE LEADERSHIP

At least since the autumn of 2012, the leather industry's representative body in the European Union (EU), COTANCE, has shown it does not want a quiet life. The Brussels-based body has shown some positive leadership on this important question, making it clear from the outset that its work shows that the leather industry's share of the carbon footprint of the cattle and meat industries should be zero.

At a meeting in Shanghai that September of the Global Leather Coordinating Committee, a body with representatives from the three global industry associations, the International Council of Tanners, the International Council of Hide Skin & Leather Traders Associations and the International Union of Leather Technologists and Chemists Societies, COTANCE with the support of the United Nations Industrial Development Organization pushed for, and secured, an endorsement for a then-new technical report on this subject. This report, the work of Milan-based consultant Federico Brugnoli, has been subjected to and stood up to scrutiny ever since. It has also convinced many that zero is indeed the correct share for leather of cattle's carbon footprint.

Sg. Brugnoli, a vastly experienced leather consultant, drew on earlier work on life cycle analysis by Danish academic Bo Pedersen Weidema. The Weidema position is simple enough: you must identify the main product for which the animal is reared and apportion to it 100% of the environmental weight. Leather from cattle, goat and sheep (generating almost all the leather in the world) is never going to hold that status. Those animals are looked after and sold for meat and milk; their hides and skins also have a value but are not a priority. It is the products that provide farmers with their primary reason for rearing livestock that have to 'carry the can' on carbon footprint.

This is the same as saying there is nothing tanners can do about the greenhouse gas an animal emits before



Animals are primarily reared for meat. CREDIT: SHUTTERSTOCK / PIXELPETER

packer companies transport it to the abattoir to be slaughtered for meat. The hide becomes available as a by-product of this process and most consumers and all tanners believe it should be used as a raw material for footwear and other leather products. What would happen to these hides if tanners stopped buying them? Would this affect the number of animals slaughtered?

IGNORE THE CORRECTION

Nevertheless, reports that focus (and sometimes exaggerate) livestock's contribution to global warming can affect some consumers' thinking in regard to leather. This has in fact happened in the recent past when the UN's Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) said in the 2006 report *Livestock's Long Shadow* that the life cycle of livestock produced 18% of all greenhouse gas emissions and more than all forms of transportation combined. It took years to assess the true environmental impact of the livestock industry and for it to emerge that the original report was flawed. Rather than 18%, it was actually 3.4% while transportation's share was no less than 26%.

Part of the problem regarding the leather industry preferring a quiet life is that too little is heard of this progress and of most examples of action that tanners and their suppliers are taking to have as little impact on the environment as possible. Furthermore, the message given out by the erroneous original report appeared everywhere and, despite the evidence to the contrary, is frequently still repeated today, probably the result of lazy research.

PILOT INITIATIVE

A fundamental part of COTANCE's fight so far is its attempt to have leather included in a wider EC pilot project examining the environmental footprint of a range of consumer products. The big prize at the end of this lengthy project as already stated, is for the EU to classify leather as, officially, a green product with all the positive benefits it would bring to both tanners and shoe makers. Much remains to be done. The leather industry is not working alone however as the Commission also received expressions of interest from the meat, dairy, animal feed and pet food sectors. As a result, it suggested

they join the leather industry in a new working group of 'stakeholders in the cattle value chain'.

Broadly speaking, the EC supports green products and green industries, but has also said it wants consumers to have confidence that products claiming to be green really do have a low impact on the environment. It therefore asked representatives of these industries to agree 'system boundaries' between them in the chain as regards sharing environmental responsibilities. This entails defining which processes to include or not in determining the environmental footprint of the diverse products involved. Setting out the leather industry's position on this has been a priority.

LIKE FOR LIKE COMPARISONS

At the beginning of 2014, the Commission's directorate general for the environment arranged a special training day in Brussels to help all industries aiming to take part in the pilot initiatives—including all those in the cattle value chain—understand what constitutes an environmentally friendly product in the Commission's view. Those attending included a number of major figures from the leather industry who subsequently became the mainstay of a technical secretariat formed to support COTANCE's ongoing initiative.

The Commission has issued a lengthy guidance document setting out what it needs the people representing leather and the other industries to do. Much of this focussed on Product Environmental Footprint (PEF), a method of quantifying the environmental impacts of products, goods



Tanners only want to take responsibility for the carbon footprint of leather from the abattoir to the time it leaves the tannery.

CREDIT: WTP

An advertisement for Auburn Leather. The background is a dark, textured image of a brick building. On the left, there are two historical photographs: one of a group of people standing in front of a wooden building, and another of a man in a suit and tie. To the right of the photos, the text reads: "OVER 150 YEARS DEDICATED TO THE HIGHEST QUALITY LEATHER & LEATHER PRODUCTS" and "And we're just getting started". Below this, the Auburn Leather logo is displayed. At the bottom, it lists products: "Footwear Lace / Sport Lace / Leather Hides & Lots / Crafter's Leather / Contract Manufacturing". At the very bottom, it says: "GLOBAL MANUFACTURER CRAFTING INNOVATIVE SOLUTIONS" and provides contact information: "AUBURN LEATHER COMPANY, 125 CALDWELL ST. AUBURN, KY, 42205. CONTACT US AT 800.635.0617 or VISIT US AT WWW.AUBURNLEATHER.COM".

or services. PEF sets a basis for comparing one product to another, helping consumers decide which is 'greener'. A fair comparison is only possible, however, if the results are based on the same Product Category Rules (PCRs) and the guidance document flags up a critical problem. All too often, PCRs used to compare one product to another are to quote, "similar but different", so limiting the levels of help they can offer in terms of making informed comparisons between products.

REAL AND VIRTUAL PRODUCTS

Part of the technical secretariat's work has been to develop a model for a representative product that offers a concrete example of what the PEF would look like in reality. Although it is permissible to use a virtual product, the consensus among secretariat members was that as leather is a tangible product that most consumers know already, it would be better to focus on the real rather than the virtual. Furthermore, it

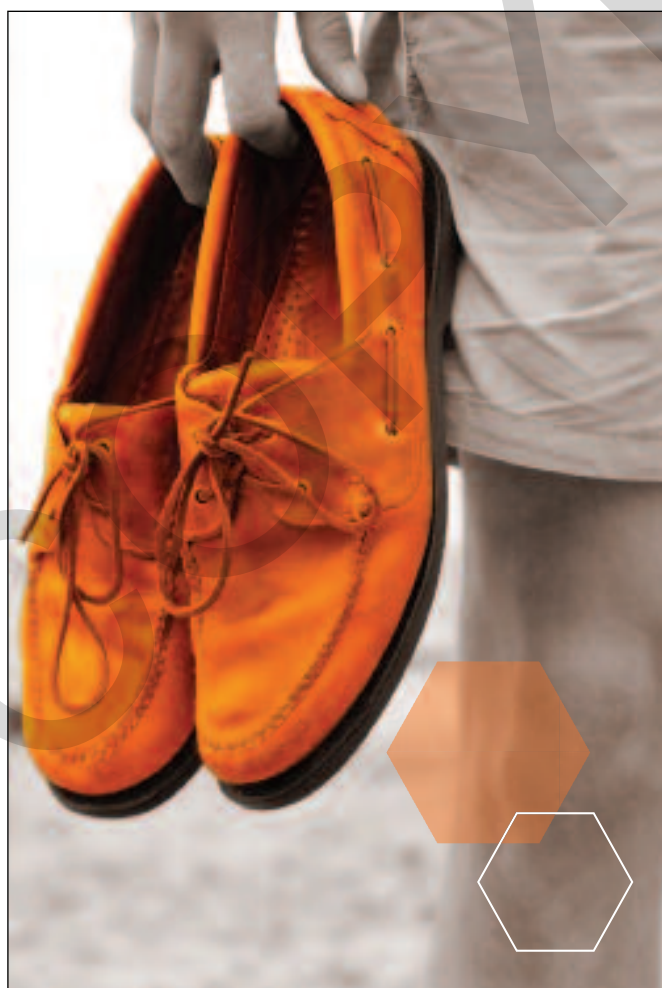
should also be leather for shoe uppers made from the grain side of a bovine hide to a final thickness of less than 1.7 millimetres as this would be most representative. It is also a product for which it would be easy to find the data necessary for working out most aspects of its environmental footprint.

It is for this product, that the technical secretariat has worked towards drawing up a PEF declaration. This will range from a description of the function, technical performance, intended use of the product, its 'expected service lifetime' and its characteristics, to calculations relating to its environmental footprint. It has needed to be comprehensive and transparent in order to satisfy both the EC and a public consultation exercise that started at the beginning of this year. Having studied the guidance document most carefully, the secretariat believes it is close to being able to make a strong PEF declaration.

One thing that is certain is that the scope of the PEF declaration that the technical committee puts together on

behalf of Europe's leather industry, where its calculations for the representative product start and where they finish, will be faithful to the arguments that COTANCE has presented consistently for more than two years now. The leather industry cares about what happens to cattle and other animals whose hides and skins it uses as by-products. But, having said that, the tanning industry's carbon footprint clearly begins at the abattoir, where the material is first put aside for use by tanners, and ends when finished leather goes into the onward distribution chain at the tannery gate.

It is to be sincerely hoped that COTANCE succeeds in its quest as a positive outcome will be greatly to the benefit of the leather and footwear industries world wide. Whatever the outcome, however, it is refreshing to see someone at long last taking positive action to offset the misrepresentation that has plagued the industry for far too long and repair the damage it has caused in the eyes of many consumers. 🍷



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