LWG on Traceability

The Leather Working Group (LWG) recognises the importance of transparency and traceability within the supply chain. It is only through transparency of supply that consumers, brands and their supply chain can ensure that the materials used in product can be sustainably selected and sourced.

Full transparency and traceability of all types of raw materials is a fundamental building block to ensure that inappropriate exploitation of people, places and damage to the environment (such as deforestation and pollution) do not take place.

Understanding where the material that makes leather products has come from is a concern for many consumers. This became an important issue for the LWG when the connection between cattle ranching and deforestation was identified by Greenpeace and other NGOs as a major problem back in 2008. Deforestation has global significance and NGOs have been involved in the ongoing situation, exerting pressure where they can.

Many global brands have been challenged to review their supply chain policies in relation to deforestation and, as an environmental stewardship group with the objective of promoting sustainable and appropriate environmental business practices within the leather industry, LWG also has a role to play.

LWG has been working to improve leather traceability for many years and has achieved significant improvement in traceability to slaughtering facilities. Included in our Environmental Audit Protocol is a section that assesses a supplier’s ability to be able to trace their raw material back to the slaughterhouse. This ensures that the leather manufacturers within the LWG program have a clear understanding of where their raw material is originating from. With this information and in co-operation with NGOs, the brands and leather manufacturers can make better informed sourcing decisions, particularly around the impact cattle ranching has on deforestation around the world.

Within the leather industry the ability to trace material can be variable depending on the scope of production, the location and the type of material processed. Typically, those sourcing directly from slaughterhouses have good traceability, however, LWG also recognised that a large proportion of leather is bought and sold through traders that reduce the transparency of supply. As a result, in 2016, LWG introduced a new protocol designed to directly incorporate traders of part-processed material into the programme.

Currently, a leather manufacturer’s ability to trace their material is recorded as:

- A direct percentage of material that is traceable back to the slaughterhouse with physical marking and robust paperwork
- A direct percentage of material that is traceable back to the slaughterhouse with paperwork only or
- A direct percentage of material that is not not traceable.

Those sourcing raw material in Brazil will need to demonstrate additional traceability to the slaughterhouse including the date of slaughter. Suppliers sourcing from Brazil will need to ensure that the meat packers, where the material originates, meet minimum acceptable criteria. A signed declaration will be required from the slaughterhouse clearly demonstrating compliance with the above criteria.

The traceability score that a leather manufacturer is awarded, is listed independently of the overall Environmental Audit score so that there is full transparency of this element. This system gives our brand members the ability to make considered sourcing decisions based on geographic location and ability to demonstrate transparency, in addition to the environmental parameters that are the cornerstone of LWG’s work. It should be noted that in some parts of the world due to religious customs / traditions, industrial slaughterhouses are not used and therefore traceability in those areas may not be possible. Brands are expected to responsibly assess those leather manufacturers on their individual merits.

The LWG considers the physical stamping of the material the most robust method at this time but recognises that other technologies are available. The latest version of LWG’s Environmental Audit Protocol rewards Leather Manufacturers who mark their material and the group is actively engaged in continuing to add enhanced levels of material transparency into our work.
There are practical guidance notes on Traceability for our members (available on the website also):

Guidance Note for Hide Traceability to the Slaughterhouse

Guidance Note for Hide Traceability - part processed wet blue/wet white including a sample letter to raw material suppliers

Guidance Note for Hide Traceability - suppliers of splits including a sample letter to suppliers of splits

For more information about the work of Leather Working Group, please contact: info@leatherworkinggroup.com or visit www.leatherworkinggroup.com