

Press Release

Leather Industry Unites in Call for Higg Index Score for Leather to be Suspended

October 8, 2020

The global leather industry has formally asked the Sustainable Apparel Coalition (SAC) to suspend the score the nonprofit organisation applies to leather in its Higg Materials Sustainability Index (MSI).

Launched in 2012, the Higg Index aims to help brands, retailers and manufacturers assess the sustainability of materials for use in footwear, garments and other consumer products. The SAC released an updated version of the index in August 2020.

Leading leather industry bodies, including the International Council of Tanners, the International Union of Leather Technologists and Chemists Societies, the Leather and Hide Council of America, and leather's representative body in the European Union, COTANCE, have reviewed the August update of the MSI and have concluded that it treats leather unfairly. They have sent a joint-letter to the SAC to request that it suspend leather's MSI score pending reviews of the methodologies and data it uses.

In the letter, the Secretary of the International Council of Tanners, Dr. Kerry Senior, said the leather industry recognises the need for assessment of the environmental impacts of products. He added that the industry remains committed to dialogue with the SAC and would work with the organisation to make its assessment of leather fairer and more accurate, but he said senior representatives of the global leather sector were in no doubt that the use of "inappropriate methodologies" and "out-of-date, unrepresentative, inaccurate and incomplete data" had led to leather being burdened with a disproportionately high Higg Index score.

"This has led to a negative perception of leather that does not reflect its sustainable, circular nature," Dr Senior said. "On the basis of current Higg score, manufacturers are deselecting leather in favour of fossil fuel-derived, unsustainable synthetic products. We believe that the reputation and viability of leather and leather manufacturers are being unfairly damaged by an assessment that does not reflect the true nature of leather or, indeed, the alternatives."

Concerns that leather-sector bodies raise in the letter include the MSI's:

- use of old, inaccurate data
- narrow geographical focus
- misconceptions about the raw materials tanners use
- reluctance to take into account the durability and longevity of leather in assessing its environmental impact

“More troubling is the lack of transparency on the basis for the score and the lack of engagement with the wider leather industry to ensure that the data is accurate,” the letter says.

END

Notes to editors:

For further information, please contact: Dr. Kerry Senior, Secretary of the International Council of Tanners, kerrysenior@leatheruk.org, or Michael Schumpp, of the Leather & Hide Council of America, Michael@USLeather.org

About leather:

Leather manufacture takes waste material from other industries (meat and dairy) and transforms it into a durable, versatile and sustainable product. As a result of a number of factors, including multiple campaigns of disinformation, demand for leather has fallen and large volumes of renewable raw hides and skins are being thrown away. It is estimated that as many as 5.5 million of the cattle hides produced in the USA in 2019 (16% of the total production) were disposed of to landfill, with negative environmental consequences and the loss of the economic benefits that derive from turning hides into leather, as human beings have done for millennia.