

SLF aims to provide a 'transparent umbrella' for the leather industry

Formed as recently as July last year, and officially launched this April/May, SLF, the Sustainable Leather Foundation, has already gathered an impressive list of partners, including fashion brands, test houses and tanneries, to its programme. With environmental, social, and economic responsibility essential in today's leather industry, its aim is to support the stakeholders and provide transparency for consumers. World Leather's technical editor, Mat Abbott, discussed its plans with the foundation's managing director Deborah Taylor.

Question. What gap do you see SLF fulfilling in the current landscape

Answer. There are a number of areas where SLF plugs gaps in the current landscape – the first being that, before SLF, no single organisation had looked at the whole environment, social and governance, or ESG, remit within one offering that is consistent in its application. The second area lies in our transparent approach, which is both fully inclusive and accessible. Our SLF Transparency Dashboard – it is our trademark – not only gives visibility to a facility's actual credentials, but it also clearly identifies and recognises the certifying organisation that has awarded the criteria.

This is absolutely the first of its kind. There are several different organisations that all provide similar types of certifications for specialist areas, but our dashboard gives comprehensive visibility for all in the value chain, including end consumers. This removes the confusion that sometimes exists around what all these certification standards actually mean. It also avoids the need for duplication of effort and resource when dealing with requests from brands and customers around sustainability risks.

Having a single reference point where all of a facility's information can be displayed is valuable, not just for the facility but also for the value chain customer and end consumer. It can also include added value details – such as renewable energy purchase, community social schemes, etc., that may not be an auditable element but nonetheless gives additional indicators of a company's values and good practice.

SLF is focused on ensuring that the end consumer is brought into the sustainability conversation within the industry – this is another area that has been missing until now. Our industry does quite well at talking to each other

but has been reticent to openly communicate with the external community. SLF is committed to creating consumer-focused information – in clear concise language that everyone can understand and relate to. It also resonates with their key concerns about raw materials and responsible, ethical production of the articles they purchase.

Deborah Taylor previously managed the Leather Working Group, is a Practitioner of the Chartered Quality Institute and is also an accredited ISO9000 Social Systems Lead Auditor.

BY CHRIS SUSTAINABLE LEATHER FOUNDATION





You have emphasised SLF's not-for-profit organisation status – how important is this to achieving your goals?

It is very important, especially in the current climate. To build strong relationships with organisations across the industry spectrum, we have to be trusted as impartial, independent and not seeking to make a profit from the industry. Nevertheless, it is necessary to have a solid revenue stream to enable us to do the work we do – our ambitious vision can only be realised with the financial support of the industry, but the industry can trust that the funds will only be used for the work of the Foundation and the ultimate benefit of the leather industry. It is worth mentioning that to be legally registered as a Foundation, we have legal obligations around financial management to protect the organisation from profiteering; for example, we can't "sell" the Foundation for commercial gain. We are also legally registered as a Community Interest Company and to do that we have to specify the community we serve – and of course that community is the global leather industry.

You have a wide range of founding partners – how do they benefit from being founders?

Our founding partners represent the group of organisations that have understood the vision of SLF right from the start and have been willing to support us in this pivotal development year. It represents huge trust on their part as they had no results to gauge success on, but they did ultimately believe in the vision and the passion of our aims and objectives. The wide range of partners is also a testament to the value of SLF across the whole industry.

Among them are brands, tanners from different product sectors, chemical companies, machinery companies, innovation solution providers, testing houses and consultants. The difference in their size is also an indicator of relevance and value – we have small start-ups right through to long established multi-national companies. In terms of benefits, these organisations are able to constructively support our development process and act as a barometer for us in terms of progress. It really gives them credit as forward-thinking organisations that understand the need for transformative change and collective action to achieve a sustainable future for the leather industry.

The Dashboard is open source for the basic view and partners of SLF can click on each section to see the basis of assessment and metrics related to the result.

Similarly, with the SLF collaboration hubs – how do you ensure an unbiased approach from members?

The collaboration hubs are completely open and accessible to any interested party – you don't have to be a paying partner of SLF to participate. During our first round of meetings in April and May, clear terms of reference and a code of conduct were presented. These hubs represent an opportunity to bring collective experience, expertise and knowledge together in a pre-competitive space, in order to consider key challenges, risks and opportunities for our industry. There is no cost or barrier to access and all participants can either contribute to the discussions or just observe and learn from others. There is no vested interest for any party, other than creating positive actions for the industry.

Do you differentiate between legal and legislative requirements, and self-imposed procedures – as some countries will differ on this?

This is an interesting question. To have a basis upon which to create a standard, there must be an application of at least a minimum required expectation. Within that premise, it is accepted that not all legislative requirements or accepted norms will be consistent in all areas around the world. In order to combat this, we have a couple of solutions: the first is that wherever possible our starting point is to use already existing normative standards – these could be ILO Conventions or OECD Due Diligence when we are considering social aspects, or it could be ISO standards when we consider environmental management or health & safety. The second way we approach this challenge is to make it clear that a facility does not have to complete every section of the three ESG modules in order to be registered and listed on the SLF Transparency Dashboard. If an organisation doesn't have a legal requirement for a certain element and they don't wish to voluntarily comply with something that isn't required, then that part of their dashboard will remain "unassessed". The ability we have to apply notes to the dashboard that will explain situations like that make it unique in its ability to accurately and transparently show the full picture to value



Audit modules are colour coded : Grey signifies not yet started that assessment; Orange signifies it is in progress, Green signifies that the section has been successfully assessed and Red signifies a failing section.

chain customers. SLF doesn't discriminate, nor exclude, on the basis of ability – but shows the context of each individual facility's performance.

Can you explain or expand on the inclusion of third party audits and schemes?

Recognition of existing certification, irrespective of the issuer, is part of the inclusive vision of SLF. If a tannery has already undergone audits with LWG, ICEC, BSI, Intertek, Oeko-Tex, SGS, CSCB or any other credible organisation, then we do not require them to have yet another audit through SLF for the same criteria. A facility can provide us with evidence of their audit report and certification, which allows us to map that onto our dashboard and avoids duplication of effort and resource. This puts the freedom of choice into the hands of the facility about which certification organisation they would like to work with. For the brands and value chain customers, they will be able to see at a glance that if they require ISO14001, for example, then it has been achieved (irrespective of who certified it, as long as it is a credible party).

As an extension to this, we have already begun equivalency discussions with some certification companies to better align part of the SLF audit standard with their own offerings, to further streamline the equivalency approach in the future, which will provide even greater clarity for the end customers over what different certification programmes really mean.

Sustainability is clearly a buzz word at the moment, overused some might say. Do you worry that companies might sign up and see that as "doing their bit"?

This is a great question and I would even go so far as to say that some people use the word "sustainability" without really understanding what it means. It has to be recognised that truly "walking the walk" and not just "talking the talk" is a

huge undertaking for many companies – and will require a lot of energy, commitment and resource. The primary factor in SLF's deliberate use of the term "partner" in referring to organisations that join SLF, is to reinforce the concept of working in partnership – partnership between SLF and the companies that join, partnership between brands and their value chains and partnership between industry associations. It is important that brands and retailers feel secure enough to really work actively with their suppliers even if they are not yet where they need them to be. They shouldn't be afraid to continue working with a supply chain that isn't perfect – sustainability isn't a static destination but a journey of continued improvement that takes into account the principles of people – planet – profit.

What does the next 18 months hold in store?

Someone said to me recently "in the midst of striving to get where we need to be, don't forget to reflect on how far you have come already". Our first nine months have been exciting, challenging and rewarding in equal measure, with the recent launch of our trademarked transparency dashboard allowing us to visually demonstrate the value and effectiveness of SLF. Over the next 18 months, we will build on our achievements so far with the publication of the SLF Audit Standard this July, accreditation of the standard will follow, and we have a scheduled plan for workshops once travel allows. Further IT development is already in discussion. Remaining at the forefront of thought leadership for the leather industry, I don't want to give too much away right now — but watch this space over the next few months for more innovative solutions that are planned. ©