U.S. HIDES, SKINS, & LEATHER: AN INDUSTRY LEADER IN SUSTAINABILITY & ENVIRONMENTAL STEWARDSHIP

In Brief

LEATHER IS A SUSTAINABLE MATERIAL PRODUCED USING NATURAL, RENEWABLE RESOURCES – principally farmed animal hides and skins. The leather industry purchases these hides and skins, which are by-products of the meat industry, and transforms them into one of the most versatile, long-lasting products available. Leather production – and hides and skins availability – is largely dependent on global meat and dairy consumption trends; cattle, hogs, and other food-producing animals are not harvested purely for leather production.

Leather: A Natural By-Product of the Meat Industry

The U.S. meat industry generates over 32 million cattle hides a year, along with 4.7 million pig skins and nearly 2.2 million goat and sheep skins. In the U.S., every hide used for leather comes from animals that were raised for food; the leather industry does not slaughter a single animal. Rather, the industry purchases these hides and skins – which otherwise would go to waste – and transforms them into leather.

Animal agriculture, and livestock production and processing would occur even in the absence of the leather industry. The replacement of natural leather with synthetics or other alternatives will not keep a single food-producing animal – cattle, hogs, etc. – from being processed.
Environmental Strides in the Leather Industry

The hide, skin, and leather tanning industry – which treats the raw skins and hides of animals to produce leather – adheres to a comprehensive system of federal regulations covering clean water, clean air, waste disposal, and contaminated land cleanup. “Reduce, reuse, recycle” is a widely-adopted strategy in leather tanning. Some hide processors and leather tanners are moving toward renewable energy sources and are using renewable vegetable dyes and renewable tanning chemicals. Products that were not taken up in processing, such as residual chromium from tanning, are being reprocessed to create new tanning materials. The industry remains committed to continuous environmental improvement in all areas of production.

On a global scale, water consumption for the production of leather from bovine hides has declined by about 37% in the past 25 years from approximately 60 cubic-meters per ton of hides, to 38 cubic-meters per ton. When sheep skin is included, the share of the tanning industry in global water use has fallen from 0.02% to 0.015% and from 0.11% to 0.075% in terms of industrial water consumption. The vast majority of tanneries are required by law, at national or local levels, to connect to effluent treatment plants to prevent pollution of land and waterways.

Leather: More Environmentally-friendly and Sustainable than Imitations

There is no better alternative to using discarded hides and skins than to make leather. The presence of large volumes of perishable animal waste would have serious consequences on solid waste systems and place tremendous pressure on the environment.

While there are alternatives to leather products, most are made from non-renewable sources, which are environmentally depleting. Most synthetic materials incorrectly labeled as “synthetic leather” or “vegan leather” are produced using these non-renewable sources. Almost all plastics, for example, are made from oil, which harms the environment.

But, because hides are used to make leather, the environmental impact of animal agriculture is greatly reduced. Without the leather industry, nearly two billion pounds of unused cattle hides would be diverted to landfills. In fact, were it not for rendering, animal by-products would fill all available U.S. landfills within four years.

In addition, leather is biodegradable and will degrade in less than 50 years. In contrast, it could take as many as 500 years for synthetics derived from petrochemicals to degrade.

In the U.S., research is underway to improve the quality of animal hides and reduce the environmental impacts of hide and leather processing. Specifically, new commercial methods are being explored for curing hides and skins that reduce salt usage, which traditionally has been used to preserve the tissue while in transit.

RESOURCES:

- Leather Naturally
- Leather Nauturally Sustainable.pdf
- Leather Naturally Fact Sheet
- U.S. Sustainability Alliance
- U.S. Sustainability Alliance Factsheet
- Nothing to Hide
- Plastic: The Price to Pay
- LeatherFacts: Carbon: Real Footprints
- Leather Facts: Water. Reduce, Reuse, Recycle
- American Farm Bureau Federation