

Seeing the LITE

Leading brands incorporate eco-friendlier leather into their collections.

When China-based ISA TanTec introduced LITE Leather in 2007, it never expected it would go from test run to full-capacity production a year ahead of schedule. But the “Low Impact to The Environment” (LITE) Leather material, produced using recycled water and heat, solar power and chemical reductions—without making it more expensive or trading off any of its performance properties—has been in high demand.

“We are encouraged by the positive response we are receiving from our LITE customers,” says Thomas Schneider, CEO of ISA TanTec. “Our focus has been to help our customers see the value of the leather produced in a ‘Low Impact to The Environment’ facility to meet their demands of using more responsible and sustainable materials.” LITE Leather customers include Simple, The North Face, Dansko, Keen, Cole Haan and New Balance. “Many are in the outdoor and lifestyle footwear businesses, and it’s important for their consumers to know how much they care about sustainability and the protection of our environment in their business practices,” Schneider says.

Barry McGeough, vice president of footwear for The North Face, says the San Leandro, CA-based company’s decision to incorporate LITE Leather



Aravon

into a few styles for Fall ‘08 is a major component of a 50-point list his R&D team put together on ways it can lessen the brand’s environmental impact. “We are looking at everything we can do to make footwear greener,” McGeough says. “It’s everything from packaging to water-based cements to investigating organics to LITE Leather.” McGeough says The North Face will expand its use of LITE Leather for Spring ‘09 to approximately 65 percent of its leather products, which accounts for 40 percent of the entire line. “We are very excited to incorporate this into our message. It’s probably one of the most important aspects because of the potential impact,” McGeough says.

McGeough adds that the goal for The North Face is to be chrome-free in five years, but choosing not to incorporate LITE Leather’s cleaner tanning process in the meantime would be a big mistake. “We have an internal saying: ‘We are never going to let the great be the enemy of the good,’” he says. “Tanneries use a lot of water, so if we can incorporate a LITE tanning process, that’s not for nothing. If we just complain that we are not getting ▶



Clarks' Monrovia collection.

Spinning Class

Dri-Lex's Eco Collection linings offer a sustainable update on moisture management.

If you can “go green” while maintaining performance standards in moisture management, then why not incorporate both into shoe linings? That’s exactly what Wey-

mouth, MA-based Faytex Corporation, makers of Dri-Lex lining materials, did with the launch of its Eco Collection. The linings feature bamboo, wool and organic cotton as well as recycled nylons and polyesters. “It has all the performance features of original Dri-Lex,” says Faytex spokesman John Gillis. “By using renewable and recyclable materials, we are helping to perpetuate that whole green movement.”

There are three types of materials used in the Eco Collection. Dri-Lex with Bamboo wicks moisture away from the body and is naturally anti-bacterial, soft, comfortable and breathable. Bamboo is also a sustainable, renewable resource. This lining is currently featured in select styles by Clarks, Timberland and Drew. Dri-Lex with Wool has natural attributes that provide comfort, softness, temperature regulation and odor-resistance. This lining is being introduced in two Patagonia styles this spring. The Dri-Lex with Organic Cotton will be available for Spring ‘09 collections and, according to Gillis, has already been well received. “It’s been getting a very positive response as organic cotton is now featured in a lot of respected apparel brands, so it crosses over well into a shoe story,” he says.

While the Eco collection costs more for Faytex to produce, because the

lining is a relatively small and inexpensive component of a shoe (as compared to leather and outsole materials), the added cost of a shoe featuring the linings might amount to a few cents at retail, according to Gillis.

Overall, Gillis says the industry is ready for the Dri-Lex Eco Collection. “Now that there are shoes at retail from brands like Patagonia, Simple and Teva that feature recycled materials, a lot of other brands are jumping on the bandwagon,” he says. “It has changed very quickly from people not wanting it to a few guys wanting it to now everybody asking for such eco-friendly material attributes.”

Gillis says Faytex would never have dreamed of making the shift to eco-friendly linings five years ago. “Before, we used nylons and polyesters. It wasn’t biodegradable at all—it took 5,000 years to break down,” he says. “Our Eco products now account for everything new that we make—it’s either got recycled or renewable materials involved. It’s a complete turnaround.”

What’s next? While some companies are experimenting with coconuts, crab shells and corn sources of renewable materials, Gillis says Faytex will be cautious having anything that doesn’t have proven benefits. “There are properties in bamboo, which is anti-bacterial, and wool, which offers warmth and has a good feeling against the skin, that deliver on performance,” he says. “Shoe linings with a moisture-management story will remain our focus, and we will address any new developments that arise down the road that may be applicable.” —G.D.

the 'great,' shame on us for not having the imagination to drive for such manufacturing processes."

Alan Lekan, senior sustainable materials developer for New Balance in Boston, agrees it's more important to measure and reduce the overall tannery environmental impact and not just focus on one singular aspect like eliminating chrome or using vegetable-tanned leather—something that just sounds "green and good."

"These have the appearance of being 'eco' but are shortsighted in the bigger picture," Lekan says, noting LITE Leather is first being introduced in the company's Aravon comfort brand. "ISA TanTec has it right in looking at things like water use, energy consumption, chemical management, water treatment—the whole process."

Likewise for Keen, the Portland, OR-based company that has expressed a commitment to sustainability. "We sought out LITE because it combines high performance and quality while drastically reducing greenhouse gas emissions during its manufacturing process," says Kelly Wallrich, director of product and development. "LITE Leather is pushing the industry standard to a new level, and the more we know about the materials used in our products, the better we can understand our impact on the environment."

More than 60 percent of Keen's Fall '08 line will feature LITE Leather. Wallrich says Keen will alert retailers and consumers about the leather via its Web site as well as by emphasizing its benefits at trunk shows and retail clerk clinics. "The LITE production process is part of our broader effort to document initiatives in the supply chain to reduce the environmental footprint of the Keen product line," Wallrich says, noting the company's use of 100-percent recycled shoeboxes, recycled polyesters, water-soluble glues and renewable, sustainable materials as additional efforts.

"If more companies purchase leather [like LITE's], then this 'greener improvement' turns into the industry standard."

Schneider notes that the LITE Leather process is an ongoing effort toward eventual greatness that's currently gauged by an estimated 50-percent reduction in water usage and 30-percent reduction in CO₂ emissions. Additionally, 30 percent of the hot water consumed

Keen

in the production process is being generated through solar heating, with another 35 percent being obtained through cooling devices in the production equipment. Schneider says this gives ISA TanTec a firm benchmark to start from. "We now have a clearly defined metric system which gives us the transparency needed to further improve the process," he says, adding that some of its cleaner manufacturing techniques could also apply in shoe factories. "In combination, these efforts would drastically reduce the carbon footprint of the footwear industry." —Greg Dutter

