

Industry cannot ignore contaminated sites

I read with interest the spirited communications in this magazine regarding the leather industry and chromium contamination (January/February 2012 edition pages 16-23). It is kind of the Editor to offer me an opportunity to talk to the leather community in this forum.

I have no doubt that the vast majority of the leather industry operates itself with solid, capable, and effective pollution control measures, and does no harm to local communities. The industry's own certification practices are certainly capable of ensuring that large customers are sourcing leather from facilities that are well run.

Well-run facilities are not places that concern Blacksmith. Instead, we worry about old or abandoned chemical manufacturing facilities, or small and poorly run tanneries. These places are in the minority, but they are sources of pollution for local communities. Our site assessment methodologies, undertaken in partnership with UNIDO, the World Bank, Asian Development Bank, and others, using protocols developed by experts from USEPA and Johns Hopkins University, identify neighbourhoods heavily contaminated by Cr VI from facilities like these. They are not safe and pleasant places to live.

The owners of these facilities may not be a formal part of your association, but these contaminated sites affect the industry by association. Ignoring their presence will not make them go away.

Blacksmith is not an advocacy organisation, contrary to what one might imagine from our recent report. We are, instead, an organisation cleaning up toxic hotspots around the world. We do so in a collaborative and non-confrontational method, avoiding blame, and recrimination, and working for the common good. Our work is supported by

the international community and national governments around the world. The problem is not only chromium; exposures from other metals, pesticides, solvents, radionuclides and other toxins affect the lives of millions.

We suggest that the leather industry could choose to work productively to clean up sites that are damaging to the industry's reputation. Technical expertise is needed to install treatment facilities, manage groundwater contamination, and clean soils all over the developing world. That expertise is here, within the leather industry. Assisting in these efforts will not only improve the lives of local communities, it brings a sense of accomplishment and contribution to participants and the broader community as a whole.

Blacksmith has many projects in development needing technical support: contaminated land and ground water in Southern India, contaminated soil in Northern China, central tannery treatment plants design and implementation in the Philippines, and others. These projects are lacking technical skills, and the industry would be doing a great service to local communities if it can provide these skills.

I reiterate that all of our projects are collaborative and cooperative. We insist that our partners avoid advocacy or litigation and instead work under a common stakeholder group for the common good; cleaning up each site to avoid public health exposures. Stakeholders always include national governments, local institutions, NGOs, and owners. Where there is dissention amongst the group we ask that they put it aside for the time it takes for project completion.

I can be reached at fuller@blacksmithinstitute.org with any suggestions. ■



Richard Fuller
President, Blacksmith Institute.