

Icebug has been making footwear to tackle slippery conditions since 2001.



SUSTAINABILITY: ICEBUG

By measuring its greenhouse gas emissions and then deliberately overcompensating when offsetting them, Swedish outdoor footwear brand Icebug now claims to be “climate positive”. It wants other companies to follow its lead and is willing to show them how.

Positive approach in the face of climate change

In the summer of 2018, Sweden was hit by a prolonged period of high temperatures. It led to widespread drought conditions and a high number of serious forest fires. Watching these events unfold so close to home gave those in charge of outdoor footwear brand Icebug lots to think about.

“It made it obvious to us how fragile the environment is and encouraged us to go further in our efforts to protect it,” co-founder and CEO David Ekelund tells *WSA* when describing why they served as a trigger point for Icebug’s decision to try to become “climate positive” by 2020. The phrase more commonly heard is “climate neutral”, which is used when an organisation or company offsets the same quantity of carbon emissions as it is generating from its activities. Its net emissions are therefore zero. Offsetting can take many forms, such as planting trees or contributing to dedicated carbon offset projects.

Icebug chose to implement the United Nations Climate Neutral Now initiative, which was launched in 2015. It invites organisations to commit to addressing their emissions by following three steps:

1. Measuring their greenhouse gas emissions;
2. Reducing their emissions as much as possible;
3. Compensating for those they cannot by using UN certified emissions reductions (CERs) through its Carbon Offset Platform.

At the start of April, Icebug announced that it had reached its goal of becoming ‘climate positive’ a year ahead of schedule. It did so by overcompensating when purchasing CERs, based on its estimated carbon emissions. It has also increased its efforts to reduce those it generates, something it continues to do.

Measuring emissions

Mr Ekelund says Icebug has always been a “purpose-driven” business, although its central purpose has evolved over time. At its launch in



CEO David Ekelund



2001, the focus was on empowering people to be more active in the outdoors. This has expanded in the years since to also include protecting outdoor spaces so that they are still there for people to enjoy. This is part of what its founder calls its “obligation to nature”.

He describes its pledge to become climate positive as a “big commitment”, adding that, with no real indication of how much it would cost and how much this would affect the price of its products, it was “like plunging into the unknown”. Looking back at the process now, he says it was actually easier to achieve than Icebug expected, something he attributes to the sustainability work that it had already done in previous years.

The first stage of the UN's three-step process, measuring your emissions, proved to be the most challenging. It was a daunting task, even for a company the size of Icebug, as it involved accurately calculating the emissions generated by production, transportation (most of which it does by sea freight) and general operations, including those generated by its head office and by essential business travelling, for example.

The company initially doubted that it would be able to gather the required data to factor in its production footprint at this stage. The global nature of its supply chain meant that achieving a realistic measurement from this important part of its business, which it estimates is responsible for up to 90% of its carbon dioxide emissions, relied heavily on the cooperation of its suppliers. Previous offsetting efforts had not taken into account production, but in the past year it managed to come up with what it deemed to be a representative value, allowing it to be factored into the overall calculations.

Reducing emissions

After committing to the UN initiative, Icebug began to examine in even more detail its activities and how things could be changed to improve its environmental footprint.

On the dedicated sustainability section of its website, the brand gives details of several of the steps it has taken. They include reducing the number of different upper materials used in its shoes, replacing all the materials it can with recycled polyester, and employing more sustainable dyeing methods (e.g. solution dyeing). A number of its shoe models are deliberately carried over from year to year. The thinking behind this is that it reduces the number of products that would go to waste at the end of a particular season should the weather not be severe enough for consumers to need to purchase them.

It has made great strides in terms of reducing its emissions, but Mr Ekelund says there is still one big barrier ahead, namely that in Vietnam, where the majority of its products are manufactured, fossil fuels are still the dominant source of energy. Its next target is for 50% of

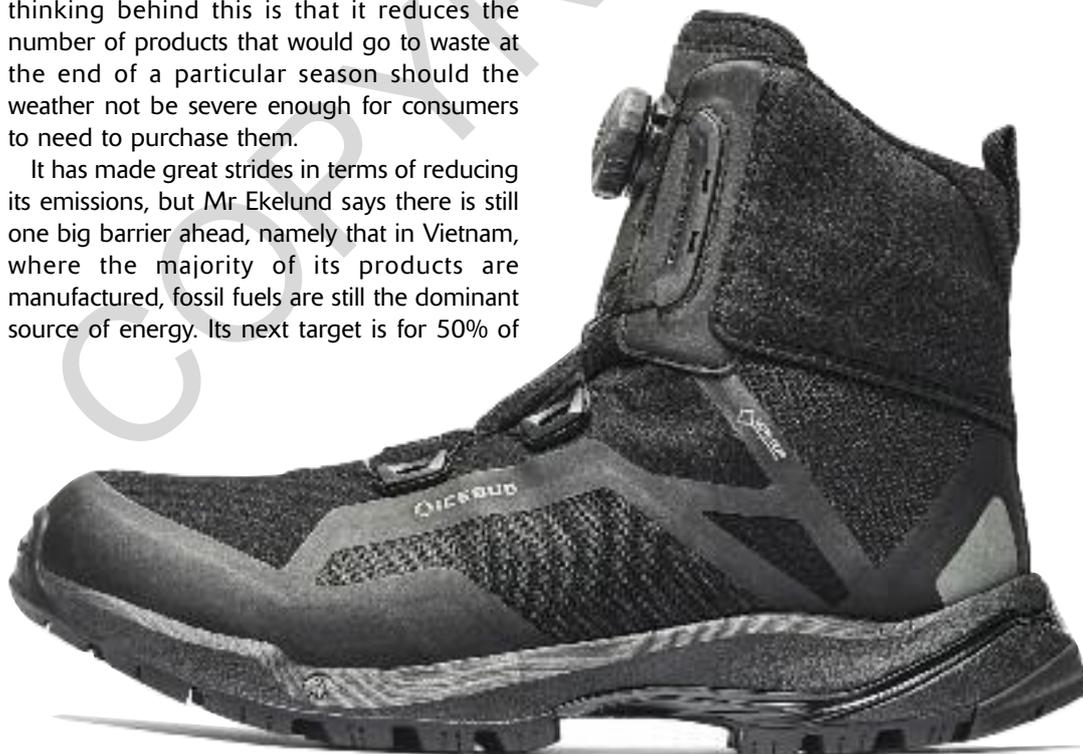
the power used by its tier 1 suppliers to be from renewable sources, something which it hopes to achieve within a year. Its founder acknowledges that this is ambitious, but he says the brand's mantra is to always aim high when it comes to sustainability progress. It is now tasked with motivating its suppliers to make the necessary changes.

Offsetting emissions

In light of the challenges of measuring its emissions, Icebug opted to offset a greater quantity than its calculations indicated that it was generating. To be exact, it purchased 30% more CERs than necessary to allow for a large margin of error. As a result, it can confidently claim to be the first climate positive brand in the outdoor footwear industry.

If there is anyone who still has their doubts, they can look to the figures the brand has published. Between March 1, 2018 and February 28, this year, it estimates that it emitted 3,637 tonnes of greenhouse gas, a figure it refers to as its "best guess" based on all the available data. In late February, through the UN's Carbon Offset Platform it offset 4,755 tonnes of CO₂ equivalent, an overcompensation of just over 30%. The cost of purchasing these CERs was around \$20,000 and all the details are freely available on the platform's website.

But how exactly do these CERs help with carbon offsetting? The UN platform features a wide range of certified projects that help to reduce, avoid or remove greenhouse gas emissions from the atmosphere. They include



The Walkabout W Michelin Wic GTX shoe is a very versatile product. It offers unstudded grip for hiking in a range of different conditions.

 Icebug

hydroelectric plants and wind farms that provide communities with a renewable source of electricity, technologies that capture methane emissions from waste treatment plants, and reforestation initiatives. All are implemented in developing countries, with the majority in Asia. By purchasing CERs, companies or individuals support their chosen projects, with all contributions going directly to them.

Icebug selected a project based in Thailand's Prankata district, which is around 250 kilometres north of Bangkok. It involves a wastewater treatment facility that captures methane from a nearby starch plant. As well as contributing to an improvement to the local air and water quality by reducing the amount of methane released, it also generates clean energy, which has helped reduce the starch plant's dependency on fossil fuels.

Call to action

The company intends to repeat this exercise of measuring and offsetting its emissions on an annual basis. It will also continue to work on reducing those it produces. It expects the process to improve as the years go on because its measurements will become more accurate and its overall emissions will fall.

An important focus when it set out on this mission was scalability; it would like its model to be replicated by other brands, including those much larger than itself, that should comfortably have the resources to do so. As Mr Ekelund puts it: "If we can do it, anyone can do it". It has tried to be as transparent as possible throughout, hoping that others will learn from its failures as well as its successes.

He tells WSA that within the outdoor and footwear industries there is a tendency to only make public statements about sustainability progress when things are perfect. Icebug wants this mindset to change and is adamant that any progress is worthy of praise and recognition in public forums. The pace of climate change also lends urgency, with Mr Ekelund insisting: "The climate crisis can't wait for us to become perfect. We need to act now."

He believes the footwear industry is rich in people who want to push sustainability forward; what they require is the support from company owners and boards. In reality, sustainability makes sense from a business perspective, he points out, and once the major players realise this (some already have), there will be the chance for "a real impact to be made".

The fundamental problem is consumption itself, or rather overconsumption, he claims. Essentially, people buy too many things or buy things they do not need or will barely use before discarding them. The companies making these products have a responsibility here, too. Mr Ekelund says: "Brands need to make things that people actually need, and make them in a way that means they last for a long time."

He approves of initiatives like repair and product care services – Icebug's efforts include sending out replacement studs free of charge and offering reimbursement for minor repairs the customer has carried out – but he says the first step on the road towards sustainability will always be to consume in a more responsible manner. What those who are manufacturing and selling consumer products must do is make sure that their operations do as little damage to the environment as possible. Icebug appears to be on the right track. 

JRC-REFLEX expands its color range

The retroreflective materials specialist has heeded the call of fashion by developing a new range of on-trend colours for the active sportswear and athleisure markets.

French-Italian retroreflective materials manufacturer JRC-REFLEX has recently expanded the range of available colours in a move to address the growing influence of fashion trends on sportswear and the current fascination for sports seen in fashion spheres.

The company has introduced seven new reflective colours that correspond to key trends. "As the use of reflective fabrics and trimming expands, we felt the need to offer more colours for brands that seek to target crossover fashion and sports uses", says company CEO Celine Cugerone. These new references are available in large width rolls as well as tapes and piping.



For active sports end-uses that require higher levels of breathability, JRC-REFLEX has also introduced a new stretch reflective fabric with perforations that will enhance the comfort of users.

For accessories and specifically bags, the company has developed a new mechanical stretch woven reflective fabric that features improved abrasion resistance properties. This reference comes with a 100% recycled polyester backing material.



About JRC-REFLEX: JRC-REFLEX is a manufacturer of high-quality retroreflective fabrics and trimming. Founded in 1988, the company is based in Romans, France.

Its state-of-the-art factory is located in Bergamo, Italy.

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