

A small railway that's on the move



A once abandoned railway line comes to life again - the Lappwald railway is getting goods off the road and onto the railway. Heavy locomotives pull a seemingly endless series of goods wagons through the picturesque countryside in the Weferlingen region. This part of Saxony-Anhalt is characterized by its gentle hills and tranquil meadows and is near what was once the East-West German border. The contrasts could hardly be bigger. This region is also industrial, with gravel and stone chippings being quarried. Salt is deep-mined, quartz sand is opencast-mined. The return to

the railway has long since started between Haldensleben and Helmstedt, explains Hans-Dieter Lewandowski, Director of the company Lappwaldbahn GmbH.

At the moment, 500,000 tonnes of goods leave the local area each year by rail. Of these, 400,000 tonnes go on the Lappwald railway. The private rail company has set itself a traditional task. Getting more goods off the roads and onto the railways is something that Lewandowski views as being a promising business venture. The limited capacity of the roads around Weferlingen mean there is no other choice but to make use of the local railways. Local residents have also welcomed the clear reduction in the number of HGVs on the local roads, which was having a detrimental impact on their quality of life. Then there were the demands expressed by potential customers for deliveries by rail.

The Lappwald railway is answering their call. Established in 1997, it has now taken over 50 kilometres of track that the Deutsche Bahn no longer wanted to operate. Trains are now running on both the Weferlingen-Grasleben-Helmstedt and Weferlingen-Haldensleben routes.

The company Lappwaldbahn Service GmbH is responsible for the upkeep of the track itself. The modernisation of the tracks has now been underway since 2009. The old sleepers have been exchanged and sections of track and points replaced. So far, 2.1 million Euros have been invested in the track around Weferlingen. This was partly funded with subsidies from the State of Saxony-Anhalt, which has been strongly involved in projects of this kind, reports Hans-Dieter Lewandowski. Goods trains - including those with an axle load of 21.5 tonnes - now use the rail line without any problem. Bringing the line from Grasleben to Weferlingen back to the required standard came with a big price tag. This line, which had been partially closed for many years during the division of Germany, will only be fit for goods traffic in the autumn (at the latest) after the completion of a 1.5 million Euros investment programme.

The Director explains how he only came across his railway "by pure chance". For several years he was the manager of the school for railway transport technology at Siemens AG Transportation Systems. It was at this time that he first began working on the development of a concept for the profitable operation of the Lappwald railway, which was then going nowhere fast. The project fascinated him, having had a passion for railways since his childhood. His grandfather, who was a train driver, had taken the young Lewandowski along on thrilling train rides in the driver's compartment. Facing early retirement, Lewandowski, now 63, didn't quite feel ready to hang up his boots, and decided to take on a new challenge.

His decision is bearing fruit. In 2011, the Lappwald railway achieved a turnover of 1.2 million Euros, a sum which is set to double this year. The overall concept works through the operational management of the lines that connect with the company's own network of routes. Nine locomotives are in continuous operation and the company has also acquired technology for track construction work. The private rail company's goods trains now travel throughout Germany. And the Lappwald railway always has vacancies for train drivers. The company currently has in the region of 30 employees.

And Lewandowski has further plans for the future. He wants to focus on container traffic for which he views the port of Hamburg as being a key centre. There would, of course, have to be enough business - but the Director is optimistic of the potential rail transport to Saxony-Anhalt existing. He wants to start putting down the foundations now - albeit with the outlook of a medium sized businessman. He doesn't want to take the second step before he takes his first. "We want to remain manageable and grow at a healthy pace," he explains. The railwayman will, of course, be attending this year's "transport logistic" in China, the world's biggest trade fair for transport and logistics. You have to stay on the ball and recognise the current trends. Container transports to and from China have a future. And auto suppliers appear certain to take up such services to an increasing extent.

Every now and then, Lewandowski puts the time aside for a special trip for which a train that is now a good 60 years and which is christened Anton is more than ready. It offers space for nearly 100 people and reaches a top speed of 80 kilometres per hour. The train was built in 1951 and has seen service on the Tegernsee railway, the Frankfurt-Königsteiner route, the Regental railway and the Stauden railway. It ended up in Saxony-Anhalt, where it was refurbished, and is now popular for special trips. Quite often, the director steps into the driver's cabin himself and steers the locomotive through the countryside. Doing something for the local region and helping to attract tourists is an important task.

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