

From the branch line to the Middle Kingdom



From a rail platform in China all the way to VW in Wolfsburg, for example. This is just one of Hans-Dieter Lewandowski's imaginary ideas for a future business area of the Lappwaldbahn GmbH. The private railway company, located at Saxony-Anhalt's border with Lower Saxony, just 30 km from Wolfsburg, is setting its sights on the growing Asian market, and in both directions of travel. In this context, VW could send prototypes for its new models of car including the full plant by rail to its Chinese factories, or a Chinese manufacturer of laptops could send consignments of containers to Europe. At the world's biggest trade fair for transport and logistics in Shanghai, Lewandowski learned that China is interested in building a transcontinental rail link through Asia to Europe to halve transport times compared with container shipping. Of importance is that the standard gauge is used throughout so that the time consuming gauge changes of the rail cars on the wider-gauge Russian lines are omitted. As a participant

on a trade fair trip made by businessmen from Saxony-Anhalt to the 'transport logistic China', Lewandowski made use of the options for forging new contacts there. Looking back at his discussions, he talks about the open mindedness of the Chinese rail companies, "who want to cooperate with us." And he also discusses the idea of organising transports over the several thousand kilometre route from Asia with the Lappwaldbahn railway in his future role as a 'Freight Manager'. Lewandowski has already signed a statement of intent with the Czech Railways in Shanghai for the collection of transports from the border, to be able to then take them to their destination rail stations in Germany. For the regional railway operator, China is currently a medium-term source of turnover, but he also envisages it as being increasingly important. So far, the Lappwaldbahn railway, which is based in a former railway building in Weferlingen in the former restricted zone of the erstwhile inner German border, has mostly operated in Central and Northern Germany. On the 50 kilometres of rail track which it either owns or rents, and in cooperation with neighbouring private railways and with the Deutsche Bahn, the Lappwaldbahn railway transports quartz sand, lime, gravel and salt from neighbouring mines. This amounts to roughly 400,000 tonnes of bulk goods every year "which would not otherwise travel by rail because it isn't profitable enough for the Deutsche Bahn." The Lappwaldbahn railway wants to continue to "remain close to its customers and not to become too big." Yet the railway businessman is looking keenly at the growing traffic flows in international trade towards Eastern Europe, Russia and Asia. "Foreign business is growing and therefore the value of logistics." Transports by HGV cannot be extended indefinitely. Air transport is too expensive for large scale cargoes, ships are too slow and piracy on the world's oceans also means they are increasingly unsafe. As a small logistics services provider which can respond to changing customer requirements quickly, the Lappwaldbahn railway completes rail transport orders which "have to arrive at their destinations reliably and on time." And that means from the dispatch ramp of the sender to the recipient's loading point. In this context the private rail company, which has its own identification number, can regularly be seen going in and out of the Port of Hamburg. Lewandowski explains that it is "companies like ours that are responsible for the growth in rail traffic." He sees a risk in the closure of many branch lines, however: "If they keep on closing more and more of the smaller routes then at some point the main routes will dry out." With the refurbishment of 32 kilometres of track between Weferlingen and Haldensleben that has recently been confirmed, and which is to receive financial support from EU grants, from the federal growth programme and from the state of Saxony-Anhalt, the Lappwaldbahn railway has ensured further rail operations with heavy good trains with an axle load of up to 22 tonnes, and is now expecting the extension of its franchise as a rail company for another 15 years. The next investment that the Director is planning on making is in new locomotives. And this is an area where China could come in again: During a discussion at the trade fair in Shanghai, a Chinese bank with a branch in Frankfurt am Main expressed interest in the financing. In view of the reluctance of German credit institutes to support medium sized companies, this is an option that the 62 year old, who is hoping to find someone in his family to help run his company when he steps down, is pleased to consider. Author: Ute Semkat Contact: Lappwaldbahn GmbH Hans-Dieter Lewandowski, Managing Director Am Bahnhof 439356 Weferlingen ph: +49 39061 41100 E-Mail: hans-dieter.lewandowski@lappwaldbahn.de Web: www.lappwaldbahn.de

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