

# A vision prevails - Development of brown coal chemistry making progress in Central Germany

16.09.2013



The vision of domestic brown coal as a chemical raw material, of its material use, of the creation of a complete value-added chain in Central Germany, is now prevailing – albeit not as speedily as hoped for at the start of the project five years ago. This was the message suggested at the 2nd ibi Expert Symposium held on 13 June in Halle.

Experts from the fields of science, industry and administration presented an interim assessment. 'The objective remains the construction of a brown coal chemistry park', explained ibi Chairman Andreas Hiltermann. 'However, due to the changed framework conditions now existing since the start of the project five years ago, we did not win the competition for the extraction of syngas for the next decade', admitted the former head of InfraLeuna GmbH and Chemistry/Plastics Cluster of Central Germany spokesman for the area of feedstock. 'Although at that time it was assumed

that the parallel global market price development of oil and natural gas would continue, the ever increasing use on a global scale of fracking as a method for production has caused the price of this raw material to collapse. Nevertheless, it is still worthwhile adhering to this theme.'

Notwithstanding this fact, there have been 900 investment projects worldwide in this area in the previous five years – albeit only 80 in Europe, of which three are in Leuna. Hiltermann called for legal security for investors, putting gas, oil and coal on an equal footing as well as for the worldwide return to competitive prices. In this regard, the ibi activists are able to count on full political support. 'The State Government stands firmly behind this project', stated Tamara Zieschang, State Secretary in the Saxony-Anhalt Ministry for Science and the Economy, adding that ibi is of 'absolutely enormous importance' to the State Government'.

She then continued 'Our state possesses approx. four billion tonnes of brown coal deposits. This represents a great opportunity for an alliance consisting of the brown coal, chemical and plant engineering industries'. She called on science and industry to work together even more closely in developing new technologies, new systems and new processes. 'ibi is the synonym for innovative coal chemistry in Central Germany,' Zieschang emphasised in front of some 100 participants of the symposium. 'It should be our ambition to be a world leader not only in extracting the raw material, in the technologies, in plant and apparatus construction but also in the production of basic materials.'

Hans-Peter Hiepe from the Federal Ministry for Education and Research (BMBF) also addressed the changed conditions. He also drew attention to problems associated with the highly complex project. As examples, he gave the CO2 emissions and the encroachment on the landscape. The subject is, in his words, oriented in a highly emotionalised environment. 'Nevertheless, the slogan 'brown coal is too important to be burned' still applies. While elsewhere there exists a decreasing willingness to invest, the Government remains committed to the project', assured Hiepe. 'Even if the period prior to success has become longer, the efforts must not slacken. I remain very hopeful', he said, explaining that the dynamics of a project such as ibi were achieved as a result of entrepreneurial commitment. To all intents and purposes, BMBF perceives itself as an investor. As such, it expects an adequate return. The prerequisite here is a business plan in order to be able to respond to changes. 'At the current time, it is still not yet possible to measure the importance of the ibi Project for Saxony-Anhalt and for Central Germany', he stressed. He also recalled that to date the Federal Government had invested ten million euros in ibi as well as a further ten million euros in the Freiberg Raw Material Research Centre. 'This is money well invested,' Hiepe declared.

Marion Wilde from the Directorate-General for Energy at the European Commission also gave encouraging words, saying that the ibi Project should be pursued with commitment. 'It fits in well with the direction sought by the EU to make use of as much domestic raw material as possible'. According to Wilde, there were three criteria to be met: namely sustainability, plant safety and competitiveness. 'I will keep my fingers crossed that coal chemistry receives an opportunity to be included in corresponding EU funding programmes', she said. She recommended finding strong international partners, for example in Poland or the Czech Republic, warning that without partners in three or four countries the prospects would be few. Conference moderator Gunthard Bratzke, also Head of the ibi Administrative Office, reported that contacts with Russia, Mongolia and the Czech Republic had already been established. The various aspects of the subject came under close scrutiny in the course of the symposium.

On the basis of six collaborative projects, Tom Naundorf, Director of Technology at Romonta GmbH, illustrated how far ibi had made progress along the individual process stages. Through the extension of the value-added chain, a modular concept was developed in order to be able to react to changes.

As the next steps after 2014, ibi Chairman Andreas Hiltermann specified the following tasks in his résumé effecting the various process stages: The models to explore deposits must be refined; a reference system must be created for customers; a concept for the construction of a large-scale plant for demonstration purposes is required; an extraction pilot plant is necessary to provide the evidence of industrial feasibility. The focus will be on the development of a concept for and the construction of a low-temperature testing facility and ultimately on the development of a nucleus for a brown coal chemical park.

The founding of ibi five years ago was a reaction to the scarcity of oil and natural gas, to the one-sided dependency on them, to increasing prices and to the approaching post-oil era.

At that time, ten regionally rooted companies and two universities in the Halle-Merseburg-Leipzig region came together for the purpose of developing new technologies for the material use of brown coal. The integration of brown coal into the chemical industry toward which they strove is funded by the BMBF with the 'ibi' Project. Extensive investment is estimated for the development of a process chain starting from the deposit via the extraction through to refining. According to Hiltermann, 'We have made good progress on this path to our objective'.

16.09.2013

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