

Bioeconomy in the Danube region – successful launch of EU project

The kick-off conference of the Interreg Danube DanuBioValNet project was well attended. As many as 97 representatives from 67 organisations and 12 countries participated in the meeting. Stakeholders from cluster organisations and companies as well as representatives of higher education institutions and policymakers were given information about all aspects of establishing a biobased industry in the Danube region and what is required to turn plans into reality. The many speeches and lectures covered issues ranging from the cultivation and use of medicinal plants to the development of marketable products in the field of construction and the establishment of bioenergy villages in Romania.

The welcome address by the Vice-Chairman of the Czech government's R&D Council, Arnost Marks, was the first to highlight the high value that countries in the Danube region place on the establishment of a biobased industry as a future part of their economies. The Deputy Minister for the Economic Section and Information Technology in the Czech Ministry of Agriculture, Zdeněk Adamec, emphasised, amongst other things, the importance of climate-friendly economic practices. He also spoke about droughts like in 2015 in the Czech Republic, where water shortages led to huge harvest losses and nearly put some companies out of business. He also said that he hoped this can be prevented in the future. Prof. Dr. Ralf Kindervater gave an overview lecture, in which he also addressed the opportunities that a shift to a bioeconomy in the Danube region can offer. "Today, we are witnessing a historic launch of a future biobased-industry network in the Danube region," said Kindervater.

Funding programmes and best-practice examples of biobased products

Several overview presentations provided concrete information on finance options for companies and universities for biobased developments (BBI, Interreg Danube programme or special funding programmes for cluster organisations).

Rainer Fischer, head of Development Fixing Systems Plastics at fischerwerke GmbH & Co. KG, presented the company's Greenline product line, one of the first successful market launches of biobased products. He explained how the idea of using biobased raw materials instead of fossil resources is already happening in existing entrepreneurial decisions. fischerwerke GmbH & Co. KG with its high focus on sustainability, has already placed a number of biobased products on the market, including semi-biobased plugs and fully innovative biobased mortar systems.

Daniel Pohludka from a Czech company called NAFIGATE Corp. presented a whole range of biobased polymers from the polyhydroxyalkanoates group that are already being used by a number of companies. Prof. Vladimir Sedlarik of the Czech Tomas Bata University expressed a slightly critical view of biopolymers and pointed out that using them is not automatically an advantage, particularly when it comes to the higher price of such materials.



The audience were particularly interested in the lecture given by Prof. Dr. Rainer Luick (Rottenburg University of Applied Sciences). Luick spoke about the importance of medicinal plants in phytopharmaceuticals and cosmetics for companies across the Danube region, including for example the large number of pharmaceutical companies in Baden-Württemberg that have a long tradition of using medicinal plants as well as Eastern European countries that are the traditional suppliers of raw materials to the phytopharmaceutical and cosmetics industries. All attendees were keen to find out about the development of this value-creation chain that particularly focuses on using sustainable, nature-compatible harvesting methods. Luick highlighted that the equitable distribution of profits will also need to play an important role in this process. Currently, it is usually the poorest of the poor who cultivate or harvest medicinal plants. Luick therefore emphasised that ensuring they have good future prospects is another important goal for the Danube region as it moves towards a biobased economy.

Over the next two years, the DanuBioValNet project aims to create new value-creation networks in a broad range of industry sectors. Regional and national cluster organisations are expected to be the major drivers of the change towards a biobased industry, and it was with this in mind that a cluster brokerage event was organised alongside the meeting. By the end of the event, 22 cluster organisations had already made initial contact with each other.

