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WORLD MAP OF THE SOLAR THERMAL INDUSTRY

Expansion despite crisis



“We’re going full speed ahead”

Robert Kanduth has turned GreenOneTec into the world's largest manufacturer of flat plate collectors.

Photo: GreenOneTec

In 2009 the solar thermal industry suffered a downturn, especially in Europe. Nevertheless, GreenOneTec, the world's largest producer of flat plate collectors, plans to continue investing heavily. SUN & WIND ENERGY talked to CEO Robert Kanduth.

S&WE: Mr. Kanduth, this year it looks as if the European solar thermal market will shrink rather than grow, just as it did in 2006. It is unlikely that your company will be able to beat last year's record result of one million square metre installed collector area.

Robert Kanduth: 2009 has seen the entire solar thermal industry in decline. This is mainly due to the German market. But the solar thermal market has always been very volatile. We have become accustomed to ups and downs and can respond flexibly to these sorts of fluctuations.

S&WE: You have expanded GreenOneTec vigorously in 2009 and invested in glass processing and automation. Will you be forced to lower your sights for the coming year?

Kanduth: We have made investments as planned this year and will continue to do so next year. And we will not be cutting back on research and development one iota. On the contrary, it's full speed ahead and we will be launching three new collector types in 2010.

S&WE: Will you continue expanding production automation?

Kanduth: We have been heavily expanding ro-

botic production. This is where the future lies – in absorber and collector manufacturing.

S&WE: Kioto Clear Energy S.A. de C.V., an affiliate of GreenOneTec, has started making collectors in Mexico this year. Both companies belong to Kioto Clear Energy AG. Why are you taking this step to America?

Kanduth: It is almost impossible to export collectors from Europe to America. The costs are simply too high, with customs duties and a weak dollar exchange rate on top. These are the reasons why we must produce in America.

S&WE: Are there any differences in manufacturing between the Mexican Guadalajara and Austrian St. Veit sites?

Kanduth: None really. We manufacture semi-automatically at both sites, although automation in Guadalajara is not quite as extensive. The product itself is adapted to the climate over there and its

design is less sophisticated than the European collectors.

S&WE: Your GreenOneTec strategy is to manufacture a wide range of different collector types in order to offer individual products to OEM customers. Does Kioto Clear Energy in Mexico also follow this concept?

The Kioto group

Austrian Kioto Clear Energy AG is the parent company of several enterprises including GreenOneTec Solarindustrie GmbH which are active in solar thermal power and photovoltaics. Kioto Clear Energy's core business is the production of heat exchangers, fresh water modules and buffer storages. In addition to Mexico-based Kioto Clear Energy S.A. de C.V., the photovoltaics companies Kioto Photovoltaics GmbH, its local subsidiaries Kioto Photovoltaics Iberica S.L., Kioto Photovoltaics Italia S.r.l., as well as Kioto Photovoltaics Bulgaria OOD, also belong to the Kioto group of companies. Kioto Photovoltaics has one of the most sophisticated automated production facilities for PV modules, based on an in-house developed soldering concept. Robert Kanduth sees a further core competency in the design and supply of turnkey PV systems. In Italy and Eastern Europe alone, the group has systems totalling over 40 MW in the pipeline.

Kanduth: It's not possible to copy a company like GreenOneTec in just one year. The market in America is not yet ready for manufacturing eight or ten collector models. We are now about to start with one model.

S&WE: However, your aim is to develop Kioto into an OEM manufacturer with a wide range of products?

Kanduth: Exactly. I think that America could do with a company like GreenOneTec. Many domestic companies are not planning to produce collectors themselves. It's not worth their while.

S&WE: In America's most important market, the US, solar heat development is sluggish. A breakthrough has not been achieved yet. Is that going to change?

Kanduth: Recently I met California's Governor Arnold Schwarzenegger. Americans, especially those in California, are pulling out all the stops and investing strongly in research and development of renewable energy. In the US, the federal government is investing in renewable energy. Bush prevented renewable energy for eight years, but today there is a tremendous spirit of change in the US. Whereas over here only lip service is paid. Europe is missing the boat. Here money is still being poured into nuclear energy research, while renewable energy has to make do with peanuts. In Austria, we have been trying to set up a research centre for collectors for eight years. To no avail, because of a lack of funding. However, wherever I go to in northern, central or south America, there is a clear mood of change. Fossil fuels are depleting. Everybody realises that the sooner they start with the expansion of renewable energy the better.

S&WE: But isn't there the risk that the mood of change which you describe only benefits photovoltaics? The electricity lobby, in Japan and Europe for instance, are stepping up efforts to push the use of heat pumps to generate heating and drinking water using electricity.

Kanduth: It would be stupid to first produce power from solar cells in order to provide hot water. At 85 percent, the efficiency of thermal collectors is much better. Solar thermal will be an important element in the renewable energy mix.

S&WE: Will 2010 see some progression again?

Kanduth: Next year, I expect the solar thermal market in Europe to start growing by 10 to 20 percent again. From 2011 we will see considerable growth. We have to grow significantly if the EU's 2020 climate protection targets are to be achieved. I think today we have just reached a stage in solar thermal energy where mobile phones were 18 years ago.

S&WE: So there's no reason to worry then?

Kanduth: Not at all. We mustn't be discouraged by the small hiccup in 2009.

The interview was conducted by Jens-Peter Meyer.