

Plastics News

FILLER SUPPLIERS EYE COMMON MINERAL SOURCE

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CORONADO, CALIF. — Automotive, electrical and appliance producers are driving functional-filler suppliers toward worldwide commonality of product availability, consistency and pricing.

“Globalization will go on, [but] the only question is whether we [mineral producers] are part of it or not,” industry expert William Schober said in the keynote address “High Performance Plastics Compounding” at the Functional Fillers Forum for Thermoplastics and Thermosets. Intertech Corp. sponsored the event Dec. 8-10 in Coronado.

Schober of Graz, Austria, is president of both HiPro Trading GmbH and the marketing consultancy Schoconsult GmbH.

“All types of functional fillers and additives will be required on a worldwide basis,” Schober said. “Producers of higher-volume fillers will be able to offer significant cost advantages if they use one global mineral source and process regionally.”

Mineral variations preclude one natural filler from meeting all global demands, but common specifications can increase the role of synthetic agents and fillers such as precipitated carbonate and glass beads, Schober said.

The highest-volume functional mineral fillers are carbonates, ranging from limestone to marble in precipitated form. Talc, mica and wollastonite are other key fillers.

Pluss-Staufer/Omya of Oftringen, Switzerland, is already a global carbonates player with more than 100 operations, Schober said.

“They have a dominant market share in Europe, an outstanding performance in the Far East and will certainly establish themselves also at all other places in the world,” he said. “It is only a question of time.”

An automotive engineer concluded a presentation with a wish list.

Jack Chu called for high-performance fillers at low cost, “fillers that can

be directly fed into an injection molding machine" and "a single filler for all applications." Chu is a materials engineer with Ford Motor Co.'s Visteon parts-making unit in Dearborn, Mich.

At least two companies supply calcium carbonate for direct feeding into a molding machine providing a cheaper, more flexible process to the end user.

Suppliers should "try to improve impact resistance without sacrificing stiffness, strength or gloss finish," he said. Chu estimated that Ford uses about 15 million pounds of fillers and 7 million pounds of fibers annually.

The industry already faces pricing pressure, according to Sara Robinson, general manager of ceramics, coatings and distributor sales for Nyco Minerals Inc. in Charlottesville, Va.

"As producers make more specialties, the marketplace demands that those prices be lower," she said. "If prices are going down, where do we capture our margin [and] how do we build a regional processing plant?"

Meanwhile, foreign ore suppliers want value-added roles. "The Chinese and other large developing countries are going to find joint ventures to help them process their minerals," Robinson said. The ventures happening now will impact grinding operations that exist primarily in advanced countries, she added.

In another growth move, talc giant Luzenac Group is doubling its Houston processing capacity with a new micronizing mill.

The expansion should be operational in 1998's first quarter, Joseph Spano, technical manager of plastics for Luzenac America Inc., said in an interview. The Englewood, Colo., operator has 10 plants in the United States and two in Canada.

Luzenac America is a unit of Paris-based Luzenac Group, the world's largest talc producer.

In a presentation, Spano discussed use of talc in recycled products. He said benefits include increased melt strength, better dimensional stability, better profile quality and reduced coefficient of thermal expansion.

The use of talc as a polypropylene filler is "growing fast," said F. Patrick Carr, who is vice president of plastics, coatings and specialty products sales for Zemex Corp's industrial minerals group in Atlanta. Zemex combined its feldspar, talc and mica operations in forming the group in 1996.

The North American market consumes about 1 million tons of talc per year with a growth rate paralleling that of the gross national product, Carr said. A ton of talc can cost \$50-\$700 with an average of about \$130-\$150.

Carr claims Luzenac holds about 60 percent of the North American talc market, up largely through acquisitions, from less than 30 percent a

decade ago.

Schober noted one Luzenac drawback in providing a consistent product worldwide: ``no common source of talc."''

Other talc suppliers have a similar problem. Specialty Minerals Inc., R.T. Vanderbilt Co. Inc., Polar Minerals Inc. and Zemex ``either concentrate on their local medium-quality mines, or they totally depend on ever-changing talc products from China," Schober said.

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