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Best practice for sustainability and collaboration

Climate change, gigantic mountains of waste and polluted land are undoubtedly among the most pressing ecological challenges of our time. Tech start-up Infinite Fuels, based in Borgstedt, Schleswig-Holstein, has developed a process that converts plastic waste and sewage sludge into CO₂-neutral and low-emission fuels. The expert advice provided to the company by the Enterprise Europe Network, the world's largest support network for small and medium-sized enterprises, was instrumental in ensuring the success of their grant application for the EU's LIFE environmental programme.

The vision of Infinite Fuels is to establish a circular economy which is both sustainable and economically viable. Engineer Andreas Noky and business economist (MBA) Matthias Müller founded the company Infinite Fuels in September 2014 in Berlin. 'Our focus is on solving pressing environmental issues, such as over-fertilisation of soils by manure, the need for environmentally friendly disposal of sewage sludge, and the high environmental impact of plastic waste. Infinite Fuels uses this waste as a raw material for the production of sustainable, CO₂-neutral and reduced-emission fuels such as hydrogen, diesel and kerosene', explains Andreas Noky with regard to the corporate concept. Produced on an industrial scale, these raw materials are then sold at marketable prices. A win-win situation: problematic waste is mined, recycled in an environmentally friendly manner and thus made into valuable raw materials. This, in turn, reduces the use of fossil fuels such as oil and coal, conserves resources and also has a positive effect on the climate.

Searching for the right financing

After successful test runs, the idea of venturing onto the market with the newly developed process became increasingly concrete. The company founders wanted to build a production plant in Schleswig-Holstein, at the cost of approximately EUR 10 million. In their search for funding opportunities and contacts with potential industrial partners for the CoWaCo (Communal and Organic Waste Conversion) project, in the summer of 2017 Andreas Noky and Matthias Müller turned to the Ministry of Energy, Agriculture, the Environment, Nature and Digitalisation of the State of Schleswig-Holstein (MELUND) and contacted Katrin Owesen from Investitionsbank Schleswig-Holstein (IB.SH).

The right financing instrument was quickly found: LIFE, the EU funding programme for environmental projects. Katrin Owesen, who is also a consultant for the Enterprise Europe Network Hamburg and Schleswig-Holstein, was able – together with Norbert Höcker from MELUND – to provide valuable tips for preparing a successful LIFE application. It was 'fast and unbureaucratic', according to Matthias Müller.

However, although the initial reaction was one of elation when the EU finally approved the grant application in principle, the company was barely able to afford the associated conditions: 'For payment of the EUR 900 000 advance for the successful launch of the project, the EU demanded a bank guarantee of the same amount', explains Katrin Owesen. 'This demand from the EU posed a major challenge for the start-up, which had no financial reserves.' It was only through intensive mediation and the extensive commitment of the Enterprise Europe Network, together with the corporate finance department of the IB.SH, that this hurdle could be overcome.

A seal of quality for environmental innovations

A dream had come true for Andreas Noky and Matthias Müller: 'The bank guarantee, and thus the release of funds from the LIFE programme, signalled the start of the project. Finally, we were able to take action and start working together with our industrial partners', says Andreas Noky. Katrin Owesen adds: 'LIFE funding is generally regarded as a seal of quality for environmental projects. The fact that Infinite Fuels has succeeded in convincing the LIFE programme experts of their project clearly speaks volumes for the great potential of their new technology.'

In turn, the two entrepreneurs are full of praise for the quick, pragmatic and unbureaucratic support they received from the Enterprise Europe Network and Investitionsbank Schleswig-Holstein. 'We strongly recommend that other SMEs contact the Enterprise Europe Network. As far as implementation of the LIFE programme is concerned, we have only had positive experiences with EU funding bodies. Therefore, we strongly advise other SMEs to find out about funding opportunities available through EU programmes with the Enterprise Europe Network.'

After construction of the first plant in Schleswig-Holstein, Infinite Fuels plans to expand nationally and internationally. Matthias Müller: 'We would like to continue to work closely with the Enterprise Europe Network throughout this process and use the network's expertise for our business development.' Enterprise Europe Network consultant Katrin Owesen is delighted to provide further support to the company in this respect, adding: 'As an example of a LIFE success story, we will also certainly invite Infinite Fuels to information events so that the company can present itself.'

About the Enterprise Europe Network

The world's largest support network for small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) brings together 600 member organisations in more than 60 countries, who provide their advice and support to help SMEs to scale-up, access funding and finances, understand EU legislation and find potential business partners across Europe and beyond. The European Commission launched the Enterprise Europe Network in 2008. It is co-financed under the European Union's [programme for the competitiveness of SMEs](#) (COSME).

For further information: een-deutschland.de