

Extrusion Suppliers Collaborate to Serve the North American Market

WEFA Group and extrutech GmbH, both headquartered close to Lake Constance in Southern Germany, recently signed a letter of intent (LOI) for shared cooperation and strategies in providing extrusion equipment and tooling for the North American market. Joachim Maier, owner of WEFA, and Uwe Günter, founder and owner of extrutech, have known each other for years (Figure 1). Considering their companies' close proximity to each other and the cross over of their work in the industry, the owners realized it was an optimal time to come together to support each other more deeply in the market.



Figure 1. Uwe Günter (left), owner of extrutech, and Dr. Joachim Maier (right), owner of WEFA, stand in front of regional artwork in the shape of Lake Constance, where both companies are located.

"Both of our companies operate at the high tech level, supplying high quality products for the extrusion process," said Günter. "As more customers are looking to continuously improve their processes, our market share grows. Both of us are in a good position to support this growth. Therefore, this new cooperation really makes sense."

Shared Philosophy

WEFA Group was founded as an Alusuisse subsidiary in 1972, producing extrusion dies and die casting, stamping, and specialty fabrication tools for the aluminum industry. After a management buyout in 1986, the company began to shift its strategy, officially focusing solely on the production of high performance extrusion dies as of 1992. Since then, the company has grown to have four manufacturing operations, including Singen, Germany; Thayngen, Switzerland; Decin, Czech Republic; and Cedar Springs, MI.

The profiles produced with WEFA's range of dies are used in the automotive, building and construction, and electrical engineering industries, among others. In the early 2000s, the company patented the CVD process for coating aluminum extrusion dies. Dies made using this coating process are sold under the WEFA trademark CED® (Coated Extrusion Die). CVD coated dies are able to achieve thin wall thicknesses with tight tolerances and are almost free from maintenance and correction requirements (Figure 2). They also have long life and tolerance stability while allowing high extrusion speed. Other aluminum extrusion die makers are able to license WEFA's patented technology for the CVD coating of aluminum extrusion dies.

Extrutech was founded by managing partner Uwe Günter in 2005. The company quickly became known for its development of gas-fuelled billet heating systems with a new type of transport system and an optimized arrangement. Over the years, the company has expanded its capabilities to include the supply of die heating furnaces and advanced water quenching systems for controlling the temperature of profiles after extrusion.

In 2019, extrutech launched a new division focused on induction heating systems for preheating aluminum billets. The introduction of induction heating into its portfolio enabled the company to develop hybrid systems, including the Eco Heating Process (EHP), which incorporates gas-fired and induction furnaces into the billet heating system, along with the Eco Shower Unit (ESU) (Figure 3). This provides considerably greater flexibility for extruders that need to handle a range of input materials and batch sizes. "We are the only company in the world who can offer this hybrid system," said Günter. "We think the North American and other markets will begin to ask for this combined technology more and more in the future."



Figure 2. Cartridge die for multi-micro-port extrusion, with CVD coated inserts.

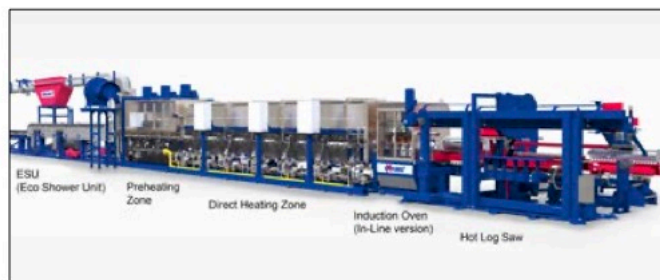


Figure 3. EHP billet heating systems combine gas-fired and induction heating technologies with ESU.

Extrutech continues to expand its operations. Last year, the company started construction of new offices in Moos, Germany (still near Lake Constance). The move to the new building was completed at the end of January 2021.

Over the years, WEFA and extrutech have crossed paths within the extrusion plants in which their equipment and products are installed. "When we go to customers, we see each other's products," said Rolf Beckert, head of Technical Sales, WEFA Group. "When they're using our dies, they also tend to use extrutech ovens to heat the aluminum billet. So, we have had contact through our shared customers."

In serving their customers, both companies have realized that they have a shared philosophy in regards to providing high performance processes for extruders. The combination of high quality dies with good thermal man-

agement of the dies and billet on the extrusion lines is essential for an extruder to achieve maximum product quality and efficient output. Wrong temperature settings can lead to defective profiles and in the worst case may destroy a die.

"We need to have a good overview of the extruder's process in order to give them valuable advice on how to adjust or optimize their process," said Beckert. "Both WEFA and extrutec are involved in providing this kind of process management advice to our customers so that they can effectively extrude and sell their profiles. This is a part of our shared philosophy and the basis for starting our cooperation."

Targeting North America

Despite recent challenges surrounding U.S. tariffs on the import of billet and the COVID-19 pandemic, the North American extrusion industry has largely stayed strong—with further growth on the horizon. In the past several months, both the U.S. and Canada have introduced national infrastructure plans focused on renewable energy initiatives in order to promote job growth, which will likely provide a boost in demand for aluminum products.

North America has been a part of WEFA's strategy since 2009, when the company launched its Cedar Springs facility (the die maker's first operations outside of Europe). "Since then, we have been trying to expand the market in the U.S. and North America in general," said Beckert. "This is not an easy task, though we've had some success here and there. We hope that by working together, we will be able to make that success grow."

On the other hand, extrutec has primarily been focused on European and international markets and is looking to

enter and expand its presence in North America. "It's important for us to be present in all major markets," noted Günter. "The U.S. market in particular is very large and interesting to us, providing a motivation for us to start activities in the region."

Strategic Cooperation

With the signing of the LOI, WEFA and extrutec will move forward in supporting each other's business in North America. Though discussions are still underway on the specific details of the cooperation, the companies plan to begin with providing support from a marketing perspective, helping to educate their customers in the U.S., Canada, and Mexico about each company's products and how they can work together to support extruders in optimizing the extrusion process. "Both companies want to support each other developing technical advantages and servicing their products going forward," said Beckert. "Working together will provide a win-win situation for each of us, and our customers."

The next stage of the process will be to provide extrutec with a physical presence in the U.S. Since WEFA's die manufacturing operations only take up a small part of their Cedar Springs facility, there is ample room for extrutec to set up administrative offices and possibly a small service center on the site.

Further down the road, WEFA and extrutec may turn to investigating the development of new technologies for further optimizing die management or extrusion processes. "I think this is just naturally how things occur," said Günter. "The more people work together and are open to new things, the more likely they generate new innovative ideas. I definitely expect new ideas to develop." ■