FP6 is expected to devote a total of over €2 billion to SMEs. Naturally, the SMEs which take part in Integrated Projects benefit directly, gaining access to technologies on which to base new products or more efficient processes. They also contribute directly, bringing to project consortia specialist capacities and proprietary know-how. But SMEs make a much wider contribution, for they can be seen as the oil which will make the wheels of the European Research Area turn smoothly. Their intense market focus is directing research efforts towards genuinely fruitful industrial and social goals, while their dynamism as network actors will help to spread research results rapidly within and between regions and sectors.

In this edition we hear from the SME leader of a €9.8 million FP6 project, and introduce a new publication about SME participation in Integrated Projects.

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Christian-Marie Bols of Wetlands Engineering SPRL with Sophie Vanhulle of the Catholic University of Louvain.

Sophied is one of the first ‘Integrated Projects for SMEs’ (SME-IPs) – a special kind of FP6 project which supports packages of research, demonstration, training and dissemination activity designed to bring about rapid modernisation in traditional industries. Christian-Marie Bols of Wetlands Engineering, the project’s SME leader, explains the advantages of the scheme.

How many SMEs are involved in the project, and of what type are they?

Sophied addresses the technological needs of Europe’s dyeing sector, which faces growing international competition and increasingly strict regulation of its environmental impacts. It will use advanced biotechnologies to develop the new waste water detoxification systems, safer dye production processes, and non-toxic dyes that the industry needs to compete in higher added-value markets.

There are 17 SME partners – low-tech dye producers and users as well as smaller specialised technology suppliers like Wetlands – in addition to seven universities and three research centres. We started by identifying a core group from among our existing contacts, and they each proposed additional partners. The degree of trust provided by these established links was crucial in allowing us to build such a large consortium so quickly.

How will the SMEs from the dyeing sector benefit from taking part in the project?

The SME-IP structure ensures that the project’s entire research effort is focused on meeting real industrial needs. In our first work package, all 17 SME partners will work together over a six-month period to define precise research goals, based on a strategic analysis of the industry. The end-users will be closely involved in every aspect of the work and will carry out pilot testing. But they will also gain privileged access to the project’s final outputs – new methods and technologies which they can apply directly in their own businesses. And, of course, we have plans for comprehensive demonstration, technology transfer and training.
activities to ensure that as many as possible of the European sector’s SMEs benefit, not only those that are taking part directly.

It is fairly unusual for an SME like Wetlands to lead a project as large as Sophied. What are the advantages?

Wetlands Engineering is a fast-growing Belgian environmental biotechnology start-up, specialising in bioprocess management and bioremediation products. For us, Sophied is a chance to become an international player by developing close links with partners in ten other European countries. We are very clear that it is more than just an academic research exercise.

Leading a four-year project with a budget of €9.8 million will certainly be a challenge for a company that still has fewer than ten people. But we will be working closely with the Catholic University of Louvain, which as coordinator will provide administrative support. Wetlands’ leadership role is really about animating the partners, and about helping them to upgrade their manufacturing processes or bring new products to market as quickly as possible. I am certain the fact that Wetlands itself is an SME gives the other SME partners confidence. They know we are serious about ensuring that the research results are of genuine use in real industrial applications.

Are Integrated Projects too large and too complex for SMEs? Not at all, according to seven case study examples in a new brochure, ‘Connected and Competitive: SMEs and Integrated Projects in FP6’. In fact, they offer participating SMEs considerable flexibility and great value.

Using real examples which draw on interviews with SME participants themselves, the new brochure shows that SME involvement is a ‘win-win’ proposition. SMEs gain privileged access to the latest developments in an advanced field of research, or to equipment or business models that exploit new technological possibilities. Meanwhile, in addition to the proprietary technical know-how of their SME partners, universities and research centres benefit from their practical understanding of the industrial or consumer needs that research must address.

“Above all, Integrated Projects give their SME partners unprecedented access to large-scale pan-European networks of relevant experts,” says Arnold. “I hope these very interesting examples will encourage more SMEs to join project consortia and share in this success.”

Contact: The new brochure can be downloaded from http://sme.cordis.lu/about/downloadable.cfm

Come on in, the water’s lovely

“Integrated Projects have quickly become one of the main vehicles for SME participation in the Framework Programme,” confirms Thomas Arnold, new head of the Research and SMEs unit in the Directorate-General for Research. “There are opportunities for SMEs of many kinds, both low and high tech. We are aware that the Integrated Projects’ specific structure presents challenges, but for many SMEs participation can be a gateway to competitiveness and growth.”

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Conduct becoming

High-temperature superconductors (HTS) are beginning to appear in commercial applications. Europe’s leading producer, the young German SME Trithor, hopes that a Co-operative Research project will enable it to maintain its competitiveness in this emerging market.

The 25-strong company is already producing HTS wire in a specialised facility established in 2001. “The main applications are in generators and high-power electric motors,” explains general manager Carsten Bührer. “HTS motors are more efficient and much smaller than conventional ones.” Trithor supplies manufacturers like Siemens, which built its first prototype HTS motor in 1999.

But today’s wire is expensive. Trithor is racing its global competitors to develop a reliable and cost-effective process for producing ‘second-generation’ wire in which an yttrium-barium-copper-oxide HTS is deposited using chemical solution dipping or ink-jet printing.

“The new wire must offer higher performance at lower cost,” says Bührer. “We needed help from academic researchers, but our interest is commercial and operational, not scientific.” He reckons it will be another six years before the new wire is in full production, but the two-year funded project will reduce the technical risks to the point at which Trithor can confidently invest in the creation of a new production facility.

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SMEs, start here!

The SME TechWeb service is an easy-to-use, one-stop source of advice and information about EU research, specially tailored for SMEs. It offers the best possible starting point for small technology suppliers or users that wish to take part or benefit for the first time.

“The Sixth Framework Programme presents enormous opportunities not just for high-tech SMEs but for small technology users and service providers, too,” says Thomas Arnold of the Directorate-General for Research. “But many that would like to get involved still don’t know where to begin.”

This is why the Framework Programme has deployed a special web service for SMEs, as well as dedicated SME National Contact Points in each Member State. “SME TechWeb is the on-line complement to the SME specific measures,” explains Antonio Loredan of the Research and SMEs unit, who manages the site. “It brings together in one place all the relevant information for which an SME would previously have needed to navigate the main CORDIS site – both about the SME-specific measures and about opportunities for participation in FP6’s mainstream research programmes. Much of the content is rewritten especially for busy newcomers to European research, and is presented using a clear structure and a simple interface.”

The site offers a basic overview of current EU research for SMEs, providing links to the on-line services of FP6’s seven priority thematic areas where appropriate. But its main focus is on the SME-specific measures, known in FP6 as ‘Horizontal research activities involving SMEs’. Its ‘step-by-step’ approach guides would-be participants from the identification of a research need right through to the exploitation of results. All the forms and guidance notes needed to put together and submit a research proposal are available for download, together with specially developed tools to aid the process.

The latest news of calls, events and other developments can also be found here, together with a fully searchable database containing details of successful previous projects to provide examples and inspiration. There is a jargon-busting glossary, and the site also offers comprehensive descriptions and contact details of sources of local and specialist support and advice.

Contact: http://sme.cordis.lu/

Enthusiastic response

Calls for proposals for Collective Research and for SME Integrated Projects closed recently. With the first stages of their evaluation procedures completed, it seems that demand for both types of project has increased sharply.

The second call for Collective Research projects, which closed on 6 April, attracted around 275 proposals, more than double the number received after the first call. “This is a fantastic response,” says the Commission’s Barend Verachtert. “Although new to the Framework Programme, SME associations have jumped at this opportunity.” Verachtert expects around 100 proposals to make it through to the second stage evaluation in September. The NMP priority thematic area earmarked €80 million of its second call for SME Integrated Projects (SME-IPs). It received 80 eligible proposals, of which 21 have been retained for second-stage evaluation, with total requested funding of around €125 million. Meanwhile, interest in the Co-operative Research call also remains strong, with SMEs naturally well represented (see chart). “There was extraordinary interest in the second deadline of 27 November, so retained proposals are of very high quality,” says the Commission’s Joachim Ball.

Both the Collective and the Co-operative Research schemes are open to third country participation, with substantial funding available for INCO targeted countries – Mediterranean partner countries, Western Balkan countries, Russia and NIS, as well as developing countries. Four Co-operative Research projects with INCO country participants have already been retained for contract negotiation, addressing topics from biotechnology to vaccine development and the renovation of antique baroque organ pipes. Other proposers should take up this opportunity in future calls.

Contact:
http://sme.cordis.lu/

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Associations tap the potential of research

Industrial associations are proving to be both enthusiastic and effective players in the creation of the European Research Area. Able to participate in EU research for the first time in FP6, they are greatly enhancing its value to SMEs.

Industrial associations have always helped SMEs to keep up with relevant technological developments. Now they can enhance this service by taking part in the Framework Programme. They are well placed as multipliers, disseminating technologies and know-how to SMEs across an entire industry, and as aggregators of demand – identifying shared problems and ensuring that research focuses on real business needs.

They are taking part in projects of various kinds. In Economic and Technological Intelligence (ETI) projects, designed to help SMEs benefit from FP6, associations are helping their members to identify Integrated Projects they can join as end-users, and in some cases to develop research proposals.

Associations are also involved in Integrated Projects themselves. The SME Integrated Project (SME-IP) Eurotooling 21, for example, aims to equip SMEs in Europe’s tooling industry to redevelopment as high-added-value service providers. Its partners include four industrial associations as well as 14 SME toolmakers and technology suppliers, four large manufacturers and 11 research institutes and universities.

Finally, associations play a central role in FP6 Collective Research projects. These support high-quality research addressing needs common to their whole sector, and action to ensure widespread take-up of results. The second call attracted more than twice as many proposals as the first, clearly demonstrating SME associations’ appetite for this new type of project.

AGENDA

ECOTEXTILE04
7-8 July, Manchester (UK)
Taking as its theme "the way forward for sustainable development in textiles", this event will bring together international academics and industrialists to discuss eco-friendly methods, processes and new technologies within textile-related activities. The conference and exhibition will be staged in central Manchester.

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http://www.bolton.ac.uk/ecotextile04/

The Athens Business Club 2004
(ABC 2004)
13-29 August, Athens (Greece)
This Greek government initiative aims to foster co-operation between Greek and foreign companies during the 2004 Olympic Games. Before the games the club, which is open for participation free of charge, will operate on-line. Registered members can access the list of participants, Greek business information and the profiles of potential partners. During the games, it will move to a prestigious site in central Athens, which will be open for members from 08.00 until midnight daily. Members will have access to business lounges and private meeting rooms, as well as a range of business services including secretarial and translation assistance.

Contact:
Anastasia Constantinou
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http://www.athensbusinessclub.gr/

Small and Medium-Sized Enterprises: Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, Threats
August 30 to September 1st, Lefkada (Greece)
Organised by the Athens Institute for Education and Research, this event will take place at the Cultural Centre of the Municipality of Lefkada, Lefkada, Greece.

Contact:
atiner@atiner.gr/

1-3 November, Newcastle-Gateshead (UK)
The event will cover a range of topics including:
- hi-growth and hi-tech SME cluster development and support
- knowledge, learning and skills for entrepreneurs & SMEs
- on-line entrepreneurs – ICT in SME development and support
- venture capital, business angels and finance for SMEs
- women’s entrepreneurship and SME development

It offers small firms an opportunity to extend their networks and establish new partnerships, and to find out about the latest trends in entrepreneurship and small business.

Contact:
enquiries@isba2004.org