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My winning proposal: Feedstock for a European coordination bid

The European Commission has awarded €1.4 million to Vision and Roadmap for European Raw Materials (Veram), a coordination and support action on raw materials. Craig Nicholson spoke to the project's application coordinator, Patrick Wall, about the bid.

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Europe's dependence on other continents for raw materials is enough of a concern to be included among the topics that form the third pillar of Horizon 2020, Societal Challenges. One call under this pillar sought applications for a coordination and support action (CSA) to improve the coordination of raw materials research and innovation activities between the EU and member states, and to develop a long-term vision for the field.

The winning bidder was the Veram project, which is being coordinated by the European Technology Platform on Sustainable Mineral Resources. Platforms such as this, of which there are approximately 40, are industry-led member organisations that have been recognised by the European Commission as having an important role in driving innovation. The areas covered include energy, environment, ICT, production and processes, transport, and the bioeconomy, which is based on biotechnology research. The Veram team won the bid in August and is due to have its first meeting by the end of January.

Veram's application was led by Patrick Wall, scientific policy officer at EuroGeoSurveys, a not-for-profit organisation representing 37 national and regional geological surveys in Europe, and which now provides the secretariat for the ETP SMR.

Did you have experience of applying for grants before leading this application?

Yes, EuroGeoSurveys has been involved in a huge number of projects from Framework 7 and other funding programmes. A lot of our involvement has been on the communication side of things. We coordinate networks of experts, rather than carrying out technical work ourselves.

How did the bid you led with ETP SMR come about?

Part of the ETP SMR's commitment to the European Innovation Partnership on Raw Materials—which is basically the Commission's main tool to implement its raw materials policies—was to try to form a collaboration linking the different groups active in raw materials research and innovation. That gathered further interest from other partners, and when this call was released, it led to the formation of this consortium.

The ETP SMR is itself a member organisation; did your bid involve forming a consortium beyond ETP members?

Yes, there are 10 other partners involved. One of the main ones is the Forest-Based Sector Technology Platform. Others include EuMat (the advanced engineering materials and technologies ETP), represented by Vito (the Flemish Institute for Technological Research); SusChem (the sustainable chemistry ETP), represented by Cefic (the European Chemical Industry Council); and ECTP (the Construction ETP), represented by UNIVPM.

How were the consortium members selected?

The ETP SMR came up with concept of a network of organisations. Then we used our existing network of contacts with many of the other ETPs and associations that we thought might be interested. We were also approached by some who had seen the call themselves. The call specifically stated that ETPs should be involved.

Did you spend a long time putting the proposal together?

We already had the basis for the proposal in the form of our response to the call for commitment for the European Innovation Partnership. So we had a very good platform to start with. Really, all we were missing was input from the various other partners.

What was the most difficult part of preparing the proposal?

Getting all the material from the various partners in countries around Europe. We had 11 partners, so it was a medium-sized project. I've been involved in projects with more than 20 partners; quite a challenge for the coordinators. Communication is the really crucial thing. You have to put a lot of time and effort into building the bridges between the partners if they're not already there. A good working relationship will need lots of phone calls or video conferencing, because it's not often that everybody can meet in the same place.

What was the evaluation process like?

It was a one-stage call, so we put together our proposal, applied and then waited a few months for the evaluation to take place. Once we heard the good news, we entered a negotiation phase with the Commission, and it took a few months to polish some of the details. Sometimes they ask for a few changes, depending on the recommendations of the evaluation panel. Luckily for us, we had a very positive review by the panel, so there weren't any major changes requested.

Why do you think your proposal was successful?

It is crucial to develop an understanding of what the Commission is really looking for. The text for these calls generally provides only a short description of what it wants, but obviously there's a lot more behind that. This will mean getting to know their policies and what they're looking to get out of the project. To do this you need to build close relationships with the Commission services. The ETP is an officially recognised body in an initiative that was set up by the Commission, so we have a constant dialogue with the Commission services involved in raw materials.

What other advice would you give to CSA applicants?

You have to consider whether you're in the right position to answer the call. CSAs must address policy issues and one of the focuses of the ETP SMR is on the development of European policy in the area of raw materials research and innovation. So we figured we were in a very good position for this particular call.

What are the challenges we face at the moment in terms of raw materials?

What a lot of people in European industry worry about is the future supply of raw materials within Europe. We'd like to make more efficient use of our own resources and reduce dependence on external supplies. There are huge amounts of raw materials in Europe which are, perhaps, being underexploited.

How coherent are the various instruments for research in this area?

At the moment they're quite fragmented. That's the real reason for this project. At the EU level, we know more or less who's doing what, but at the national level there can be a huge number of different funding mechanisms and programmes. It can be difficult to grasp everything that's happening.

The call requested a long-term vision and roadmap; how will you develop that?

That's one of the most important deliverables. Throughout the project we'll be organising workshops and seminars to try to bring together all those involved in the consortium to identify the needs of industry, research institutes, universities and public organisations. We will also want to support dialogue on future policies at national and European level.

One of Veram's aims is to encourage the uptake of research outputs; how will you go about that?

We plan to develop facilities for information exchange. This will be done through a web-based portal. It will be able to collect data from anybody who wishes to submit it, whether or not they're part of the consortium. It will provide a large database on everything that's going on in raw materials research and innovation. That might be projects or programmes and could be at the EU, national or regional levels. We aim to reduce any duplication of work, help people find potential research partners, and hopefully create a one-stop shop for finding out what's going on now and what's coming to the market in the near or long term.

When will that be ready?

It'll be launched as soon as possible; within six months would be ideal. And then throughout the rest of the project we'll be looking at developing it, improving it and filling it with data.

The project runs to 2018; do you think there will be another raw materials CSA call in Horizon 2020?

These kinds of policies are always developing. Ten years ago there was very little funding for raw materials research. Then within about a five-year period, the situation changed as a result of increased political interest. Things could change again within another decade but certainly after the project's lifetime. The ETP will continue along this line of work, trying to identify the gaps in the research and the kind of technological developments needed, as well as advising the Commission on all these aspects.

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