

European consumers are finally warming to wood plastics composite decking. **David Vink** talks to WPC producers Kosche and Beologic

# Europe looks to decking

**D**ecking. That's the one application for wood plastics composites that is really taking off in Europe, according to Christian Brueck, board member of German company Kosche, which has been developing its WPC product line over the past six years.

Panel and wood moulding producer Kosche holds a 60% market share of the German market. Brueck says its Kovalex decking range will account for 70-80% of its WPC volume over the coming years.

Kosche's WPC turnover in 2006 amounted to €5m, up from €1m in 2004. Brueck talks of an annual 60-80% growth rate in the 2007-2012 period. He says the company is preparing plans for investment in further extrusion lines alongside optimising performance of its existing equipment to increase production outputs.

The company expanded from three to seven extrusion lines in 2005. However, Brueck says that capacity even with three-shift working is still insufficient to meet demand.

"We are building up order volumes, but some orders are very much behind schedule as productivity is not very high. We are still in the red in WPC. The volume is OK, but the costs involved are still too high. We will however achieve break-even in 2007," he says.

Brueck adds that WPC specifications have changed considerably within the last two years and this has caused confusion in the market.

"Generally characteristics have been exaggerated. Too much was promised, but it is now stable."

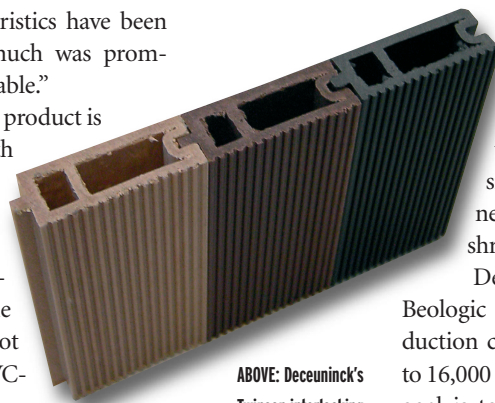
Kosche's Kovalex product is polyolefin-based with 55-72% wood reinforcement. With its strong focus on the do-it-yourself market, Brueck says the company would not be able to sell a PVC-based product.

He also says that the type of WPC products popular in the US will not be the blueprint for Europe. "They are different, too simple, mostly solid blocks and very heavy".

Right now, he says the greatest obstacle to accessing the markets beyond decking in Europe is lack of standards. And life isn't getting any easier, as Brueck says that there is enormous demand for the wood particle used in WPCs from the board and heating sector.

Marc Thometschek, founder and managing director of the Belgian WPC compound producer Beologic, also believes decking is the main area of interest at the moment. "The main targets are decking, decking, decking," he says. "Only one industry is lifting off and it is the decking industry. It's quite normal that companies go for volume – having just one percent of the decking market is a huge success".

The compounds made by Beologic are available as either 45-60% wood reinforced PVC or 60-75% wood



ABOVE: Deceuninck's Twinson interlocking decking profiles, made in Beologic WPC compound and shown at the 2006 Kassel university wood and natural fibre symposium

TOP LEFT: Beologic says that special extrusion tooling is needed for WPC profiles to allow for the material's typical shrinkage properties

reinforced PE and PP. Thometschek says it does not matter whether conical or parallel screws are used in WPC profile extrusion. But special tools are needed due to the different shrinkage.

Despite pressures on supplies, Beologic expects to double its production capacity by March this year to 16,000 tonnes/year. The company's goal is to reach 40,000 tonnes/year, Thometschek stated.

While Kosche's Kovalex decking product is going mainly into some 250 of the 2,000 German DIY store outlets in the form of decking, windows sills, claddings and mouldings, Thometschek says Beologic has been sending its WPC compound all over Europe.

Beologic's main target market has been and remains decking. But completely new niche applications have also been found for the company's WPCs, such as poles used in Venice canals to provide enhanced resistance to sea water exposure.

Work is continuing on product enhancements including foamed products to reduce the relatively high density. WPC products using polystyrene and polylactic acid (PLA) polymers, incorporation of biocides, improvement of flame retardancy, and incorporation of wood fragrances are also under investigation.

[WWW.KOSCHE.DE](http://WWW.KOSCHE.DE)

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