

Monitoring expansion

Dr. Daniel Faltermeier, Managing Director at meteocontrol North America, talks to PES about the unique solutions they are able to offer due to their wide range of services. He is very positive about the future and the internationalisation of the company is part of the reason for this...



Dr. Daniel Faltermeier

PES: Welcome back to PES Solar/PV magazine. It's great to talk with you again. For the benefit of our new readers would you like to begin by explaining a little about the background of your organisation and how you currently serve the solar/PV industry?

Dr. Daniel Faltermeier: meteocontrol started from an engineering office for solar technology established in 1976 in Germany. Since its reorganisation in 2002 it has developed into an internationally active company with branches all over the world with about 170 employees.

Besides our independent monitoring solutions, which is still our core business, meteocontrol offers holistic solutions for solar and wind projects securing the yield from residential to utility systems. Currently about 41,000 systems with a total size of 11.5 GWp are monitored by meteocontrol worldwide. Over the last years, we have also provided quality services with an investment of more than U.S. \$15 billion.

Our services include Independent Engineering, Weather Forecasting as well as solutions for Operation and Maintenance. Providing this broad range of solutions to the market makes meteocontrol unique.

Since our last interview a lot has happened. We have focused even more on internationalising the company. This is especially evident when you look at the development in North America. Since the beginning of the year we have quadrupled our work force and established our new U.S. headquarters in Chicago for a more centralised location. We have also expanded our tech support in the U.S.

The Chinese market is now also covered by a team located in Shanghai.

PES: Is solar/PV still a growing industry? How are you capitalising on this growth?

DF: Absolutely. Specifically in the U.S and China we are showing significant growth. But the markets in South Africa, South America, Japan and the Middle East are also taking off. Our services are comprehensive, so we notice changes in the market very quickly. This gives us the edge to adapt to these markets early on and then be able to offer tailored hardware solutions.

PES: How has your business developed since our last interview?

DF: As I mentioned, we can look back on quite a positive development for our international business. Even if the European market has become quieter in recent years we are still growing. We have started new developments in different fields. I have the feeling we are going in the right direction.

PES: Can you tell us about your data loggers, how and where are they used?

DF: The data loggers record all data from a PV system centrally and ensure compliance with the national and international requirements of grid operators as well as any country-specific feed-in regulations according to the size of the system.

The new generation of our data logger, the blue'Log X-Series, results from the continued enhanced development of the WEB'log series and offers valuable new functionality and a flexible, extensible system to also meet the requirements in the future energy landscape.

The X-Series sets new standards in areas such as safety, installation, maintenance, usability and networking of web portal and data loggers. Features like real-time data

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access and a much easier set-up procedure are only two of the great improvements in the new data logger generation.

PES: meteocontrol provides a range of services to our industry; please tell us about them, their technology and their importance to the end user.

DF: Our goal is to offer our customers a comprehensive, independent, quality and engineering service package. As opposed to most of our competition, we basically cover the entire life cycle of a PV project: from yield reports, risk analysis and commissioning to our own project monitoring hardware to operations' management we always have a suitable product.

By designing and manufacturing our own data logger especially for photovoltaic and wind systems, we can ensure that our customers get the most reliable product, available in the market. This is especially important, when it comes to the operational side of a project. Most issues can be solved remotely with the monitoring system, even if a problem occurs on-site. Not sending a truck to the site because of a minor failure reduces the O&M costs significantly.

Our commissioning and design service guarantees that the systems meet all requirements and is fully functional from day one.

A variety of experience in all the different fields allows us to offer more comprehensive solutions for our customers. For example, a permanent validation of our yield reports with real life data allows us to give a very precise yield forecast with a tolerance range, in most cases, below 3% for 25 years.

PES: We believe there are to be new standards for solar radiation measurement and PV monitoring, how will this affect you and the end user?

DF: Standards are a very important aspect in a market as young as the solar industry. In Europe many reliable standards have been established. The newer markets, like the U.S., are still at the beginning of this process.

For example, here in the US we are seeing a lot more interest in including pyranometers, which register the solar radiation, in projects. This enables the comparison of

prediction data from satellites, a preferred option to using cheaper crystalline sensors that are unable to do this.

Also the requirement for power-control systems is still limited, for example, in the U.S, but from our experience in other markets, we expect a strong increase in the next few years. Our strength is that we are already prepared for this.

PES: You also offer a wide range of products; can you expand on this and also explain how the various departments in your company collaborate?

DF: As I have already said, our company has its origins in monitoring. We started to offer customer-specific monitoring solutions early on. We have been the market leader in professional and independent monitoring of solar parks for years. However, the spectrum of our products is not only limited to large projects and we now offer a product for almost any project size.

Not forgetting that meteocontrol offers significantly more than just hardware monitoring. As part of our quality services, we provide our customers with a broad range of analyses, independent engineering, through precise measurements in the field and the lab, as well as complete operation management. This means we have a constant knowledge transfer between our departments.

PES: How important is training to you and what training do you provide for both your clients and staff?

DF: Continuous education of our employees, as well as regular seminars for our customers, are a high priority in our corporate culture.

The advantages for our customers are self-evident. The more efficiently our products can be used, the more time and money our customers can save and ultimately the more satisfied they will be.

Similarly, customers also benefit from employees with excellent skills. An on-going training program, with regular participation in seminars and workshops help our employees to continually increase their knowledge in this field.

PES: Geographically speaking, your key markets were the UK, USA and China, have you expanded into other areas since then?

DF: In addition to those key markets, we have expanded our activity in the Middle East, Africa and South America and recently we announced a successful approach in Japan.

PES: Which aspect of the industry provides the most satisfaction for you right now?

DF: We have set ambitious goals with our plans to expand internationally. However, looking at how successful we have been in the past months, confirms that we are on the right path and that we can be very optimistic about the future.

From a technological point of view, developments in energy storage seem to me the most challenging part in increasing global energy conversion through renewables. A lot of improvements have been made during the last years, which makes me optimistic that there will be a solution to this problem in the future.

PES: And conversely, what presents you with the biggest challenges?

DF: With our newest product, the blue'Log, we have created a completely new generation of data logger. Even though driver development is much easier for supported components, such as inverters and we are consistently compatible with almost all popular models on the market, the more exotic products keep challenging us to meet all customer expectations.

PES: What are your thoughts about prospects with regard to your organisation for the rest 2016 and the solar/PV industry in general?

DF: The development of the U.S. market with high construction rates in solar until the end of 2016 and probably beyond, leads us to expect positive business development. In addition to this, we are looking forward to a steep increase in sales in all the above markets as well. ■

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