

Interview with Dr Mike Spence, Concawe's Science Executive for Water, Soil and Waste and Oil Pipelines



Mike Spence joined Concawe in 2014. As his work with Concawe draws to a close, Mike shares with us some of the aspects of his work experience as Science Executive over the past four years.

Q: Mike, you worked for Concawe as Science Executive for Water, Soil and Waste and Oil Pipelines; how did you learn about this opportunity and what attracted you to taking on this position?

A: *I heard about the Concawe opportunity in April 2014 from Graham Whale, who is the Chair of the Water, Soil and Waste Management Group. I thought this role could be a great career development opportunity and will provide me with experience in research programme management, participation in EU policy making and experience in working on projects with experts from refineries across Europe. As my research background is in groundwater and environmental fate assessment this was also a great opportunity to extend my research experience into new areas.*

Q: You then accepted the position of Science Executive for Water, Soil and Waste and Oil Pipelines; how did you find this new challenge?

A: *Once I'd accepted the position a lot needed to happen very quickly! The interview was in mid-April and by 27 July we had moved from the UK to our new home in Brussels, ready to start work on 1 August. Thankfully August is a quiet period in Brussels and so I had a few days to read up on the work of my predecessors and learn the Concawe systems and processes. As with any new role the first challenge is to meet with colleagues and stakeholders, and in Concawe there are a great many of these. I also had to get to work on developing presentations for the upcoming Concawe Symposium in February 2015, and managing the contracting and delivery of the 2014 research projects.*

Q: What did you appreciate most about your Concawe assignment?

A: *The management groups at Concawe span the full range of environmental sciences relevant to downstream operations, and so you are working with senior experts in practically every area of technical expertise. You develop over time a very integrated understanding of the issues facing the sector and how they are being addressed, which is a unique advantage of working in Concawe. The Association is also a great place to get things done due to its small size, wide range of in-house expertise and excellent local administrative support.*

Q: Can you tell us about the key projects you have been working on as Science Executive during your time at Concawe?

A: *The main water project that comes to mind is the development of a new web-based survey of EU refinery water use and discharges to the environment. Previously this data was collected using spreadsheets, which made it difficult to understand the flows of water through a refinery and the extent to which water is recycled. The new system guides users through the data entry step-by-step and includes built-in checks on the site water balance, as well as providing sites with a summary report on their water use. For the oil pipelines management group Concawe convened a special seminar on illegal tapping in March 2016 to address a rapid rise in the annual number of theft incidents, which alerted operators to the risks and possible control measures.*



Dr Mike Spence talks about his experience as Science Executive at Concawe.



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Q: Can you explain in a few words why the work and studies conducted by Concawe are so valuable for its members?

A: *Concawe adds great value for its member companies by providing sector-level feedback to policymakers so that the full impact of policy decisions is made clear. The role of Concawe has become increasingly important in recent years due to a reduction in the number of technical experts working in the member companies. In Concawe the remaining experts can work cross-sector to deliver complex, cutting-edge research projects that no single company would be able to manage. In addition, Concawe is recognised for scientific excellence, and so is highly influential in science and policy debate. Concawe, together with FuelsEurope, can also support member companies in their interpretation of European Legislation, for example to support dialogue with national regulators on technical matters and to clarify what is required at the EU level.*

Q: Many research associates have joined the Association recently; how have they helped you in your everyday work?

A: *The introduction of the research associates (and highly proficient interns) has been a massive benefit for the Science Executives who now have more time to address the strategic aspects. They provide continuity in terms of knowledge retention, and bring new skills, life and energy to the Association, which is great!*

Q: Looking into the future, what are the main challenges ahead for your successor?

A: *Alongside the ongoing REFIT review of the Water Framework and related directives, the Commission has launched a number of studies and initiatives that could lead to significant changes in the way refineries manage water resources. These could include measures around water pricing, water reuse and new effect-based approaches to the assessment of discharge quality. In addition, there are signs that future BREF revisions may require much greater preparation in terms of data gathering, which may be difficult to manage given limited member company resources. The challenge will therefore be to anticipate such developments well ahead of time, so that the Association is ready to respond when needed.*

Q: How has your experience at Concawe helped you in your career / how do you believe it might help you in your career?

A: *I would say it has helped in many ways. For example, it has given me the confidence to lead a large programme of research activities and improved my communication skills. It has also broadened my technical expertise and knowledge of technical challenges facing refineries across Europe. I've also gained team management skills that would not be available in a technical role outside the Association.*

Q: Would you recommend that your colleagues undertake a similar development path?

A: *I would certainly recommend a Concawe role, both in terms of the unique experience it provides and the great working environment. You get a great deal of autonomy as a Science Executive, which is great for the successful planning, management and delivery of research projects.*

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Q: Do you expect a significant evolution in Concawe's Water, Soil and Waste and Oil Pipelines science in the future?

A: *Significant changes can be envisaged driven by the ongoing EU initiatives for increased resource efficiency, reduced emissions and discharges, and increased use of renewable energy resources. In particular the work of WSWMG [Water, Soil and Waste Management Group] could change if there is a big increase in the refining of fuels from renewable energy resources (e.g. biomass or e-fuels) rather than petroleum.*

Q: What did you enjoy the most about your Brussels assignment?

A: *My family and I have really enjoyed living and working in Brussels. The city is quite compact and you only need to go 15 km from the centre to find open countryside with fields, woodlands and quiet cycle routes. It also has excellent rail and air transport links making most European destinations within easy reach.*