**“European laminate reinvents itself time after time”**

**EPLF forges ahead with international innovation drive**

**“European laminate is considered high-end because it is high-tech,” stated EPLF President Ludger Schindler at the Domotex 2017 Press Conference in Hanover. “The great strength of European laminate flooring producers and their suppliers lies in their consistent use of leading design ideas and innovative technology for the development of extremely attractive and better quality products. In 2017, Europe will once again be setting the trends for the laminate flooring sector.” EPLF members are entering 2017 full of confidence and with positive expectations. Their outlook is backed up by rising global sales figures and the progress made by the Association in its technical and standardisation work.**

At Domotex, Mr Schindler also presented the EPLF’s new ‘Innovation Drive’ and announced a corresponding Association Manifesto for the Members’ Meeting in May. In connection with this, he clearly underlined the European laminate industry’s claim to leadership: “The EPLF operates as an association of innovators, leading the way towards the innovations of tomorrow, and we provide the ideal platform for implementing the necessary quality standards for improved laminate around the world.”

EPLF experts are working together on this and expanding their technological expertise. The most recent example of their success is the EU-supported research project “Deeply-textured Surfaces”. The findings from this joint project with the IHD (the Wood Technology Institute in Dresden) has led to new test methods appropriate for standardisation for testing abrasion resistance, impact strength and polishing characteristics of laminate flooring with either deep or flat surface textures. They also provide a valuable foundation for enhancing production technologies specifically for textured laminate surfaces.

The research results have been widely communicated to the specialist community and, in the spring of 2016, were also made directly available to the industry sector through the publication of three IHD works standards: Works Standard IHD-W-479 “Determination of abrasion resistance of laminate floor coverings”, Works Standard IHD-W-425 “Determination of impact strength of laminate floor coverings using a small ball” and Works Standard IHD-W-475 “Determination of resistance to polishing of laminate flooring”. These documents can be obtained free of charge from the IHD on request. The EPLF and its members are campaigning hard at CEN level to achieve integration of these results into the revision of product standards, in the form of precise normative specifications. One of their aims, for example, is to incorporate into EN 16094 (Laminate floor coverings - test methods for the determination of microscratch resistance) the test developed during the project regarding the polishing behaviour of laminate floors, to be put into practice as a third possible test method.

**New EPLF research project: “Castor chair test”**

The EPLF has now started work on a new EU-funded Association project, the “Castor chair test”. Once again in collaboration with the IHD, a test method is to be developed by the summer of 2019 that uses an appropriate test device suitable for both loose-laid floor coverings with a variety of locking profiles and glued floor coverings. Important note: underlay materials will be taken into account here. The current method for the castor chair test has been used for half a century, and experts are in agreement that a new solution must now be found urgently to satisfy the conditions and products found today.

Eberhard Herrmann, Chairman of the EPLF Technical Group, says: “The continued success of laminate is founded on continuous innovation – and international quality and test standards must keep pace with this. We are actively leading the way with our research and are committed to developing up-to-date, practical solutions. Ultimately, we want future consumers to be reassured that they will only get products with reliably tested characteristics.”

**Engaging in growth markets**

The EPLF has its own working group active in Russia which aims to improve the quality criteria and regulations for laminate flooring on the Russian market. Its members are working towards new technical specifications for laminate flooring which can be implemented in a similar way to CEN regulations (in contrast with the existing GOST standard), to be binding for all market participants. This is a difficult option, but it exists within the framework of the Eurasian Economic Union. A further measure, to be introduced at a later date, is to give support to at least one Russian institute to perform the tests required for monitoring the specifications, using the appropriate expertise and suitable technical equipment.

A look at current sales figures suggests that such commitment to the Eastern European market will pay off in the long term; growth rates in the double-digit range make this region (alongside the growth markets North America and Asia) increasingly attractive for EPLF members. The continuing development of countries such as Iran, Egypt and India is being monitored by the EPLF with interest. “The opportunities and challenges on the international flooring markets demand a common quality strategy by the European laminate flooring industry,” explains Max von Tippelskirch, Chairman of the Markets & Image Working Group. “Faced with the steadily expanding range of products available worldwide and the associated risk of variations in product quality, the goals of our Association concerning standardisation, product safety and market transparency will continue to be our top priority.”

When the EPLF re-launched its website in 2016, it took regional market development into account by focusing on offering more language versions of its online content. In addition to the three languages available previously (German, English and French), it now also features Italian, Dutch, Polish, Russian, Spanish and Turkish, making a total of nine. The new website at the familiar address www.eplf.com has been given a fresh, up-to-date layout and provides an information and download platform that specifically addresses industry professionals – architects, commercial building contractors and specifiers, skilled craftsmen and trade specialists, manufacturers and suppliers, as well as trade press editors – so they can quickly find the content aimed at their target group. The responsive web design means that the site is now suitable for mobile devices.

**“Laminate 2020 - Forum of Innovations”**

More than ever, the EPLF views itself internally as a communications centre, and in 2016 it launched its new, compact meeting format “Laminate 2020 - Forum of Innovations”. Its premiere centred around digital printing, a vast subject which the Association will continue to focus closely on in future. The second round of the forum will be held at the Meeting of Members at the beginning of May 2017. EPLF Executive Committee Member Paul De Cock says: “We will only be successful in the long term if we provide users with laminate that is not only better, but also more innovative. At our EPLF Innovation Forum we give targeted information on topics relevant to the future of the industry. Our members (suppliers as well as producers) are leading experts in their fields and we can make use of their valuable knowledge within our network for the benefit of all participants. This will enable European laminate products to maintain their leading position on the world markets.”

**www.eplf.com**

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EPLF President Ludger Schindler: “European laminate is considered high-end because it is high-tech. In 2017, Europe will once again be setting the trends for the laminate flooring sector.” – Photo: EPLF/Meisterwerke

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Eberhard Herrmann, Chairman of the EPLF Technical Working Group: “The continued success of laminate is founded on continuous innovation – and international quality and test standards must keep pace with this. In this regard, we in the EPLF are actively leading the way with our research.” – Photo: EPLF/Egger

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EPLF Marketing Group Chairman Max von Tippelskirch: “Alongside the growth markets North America and Asia, the Eastern European region – with its growth rates in the double-digit range – is becoming increasingly attractive for EPLF members.” – Photo: EPLF/Swiss Krono Group

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EPLF Executive Board Member Paul De Cock: “More than ever before, we view the EPLF as a communications centre. Our new Innovations Forum provides comprehensive information for our members on topics relevant to the future of the industry.” – Photo: EPLF/Unilin

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Laminate with top design quality, inherent technical features for best performance and, in addition, eco-friendly manufacturing processes. Under the slogan ‘Quality and Innovation made in Europe’, EPLF manufacturers and their suppliers are advancing with supreme confidence into 2017, a brand new year for flooring. – Photo: Kronospan