Photo courtesy of Jo De Rammelaere.

Normec OWS is still building up capacity at its new site within North Sea Port.

Normec OWS

Helping to tackle pollution(s)

With the move of Normec OWS to its new offices in the Ghent port area, North Sea Port has attracted another undisputed world leader in a very specific field. The newcomer is a one stop laboratory and consultancy company specialising in determining biodegradability and compostability of plastics and other materials. The company fits in well with the focus on sustainability, biobased economy, and recycling which is one of the pillars of the port's strategy.

Early August, Normec OWS managing director Sam Deconinck and Normec Sustainability managing director Mariska van Schaik cut the ribbon of the new Ghent headquarters, together with Bruno De Wilde, managing director business development of Normec OWC (right).

Normec OWS (which stands for Organic Waste Systems) started out in 1988 as a spin-off of the University of Ghent, Bruno De Wilde, managing director business development and one of the founding fathers of the company, recalls. Its initial focus was on the dry anaerobic composting (Dranco) technology, a patented biotechnological process developed at the Faculty of Bioscience Engineering of that university for an environmentally-friendly and cost-effective treatment of solid and semi-solid organic feedstocks derived from municipal solid waste, allowing for the production of biogas out of materials that were commonly landfilled.

But these plants are major investments that do not happen daily. So, OWS soon complemented this activity with biodegradability, compostability, disintegration, and ecotoxicity (BDCE) testing and later waste inspection, sustainability auditing and assessment, and analytical services and consulting, to provide for a more continuous source of income.

Solid growth

Over the course of the past thirty years, these activities became the main line of business, with a steady – and in the second half of the past decade almost exponential – increase of turnover, only halted by the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020. Sales bounced back in 2021 and stood at around EUR 13 million last year, with BCDE testing accounting for 70 to 80% of the yearly total.

The strong expansion is the reflection of the growing concern about plastic pollution and the search by both industries and public agencies for the best end of life solution for their products, and ways to recycle waste streams and to reach the ever more pressing sustainability goals that e.g. the European Union imposes for a widening range of products, with items like coffee capsules, tea bags, stickers on fruit – “a real nuisance in composting” – recently added to the list.

“We work for industries active in plastics, paper, consumer goods, food,... testing for instance how their products score in compostability, ecotoxicity, and biodegradation in various environments, from fresh and marine water to landfills and different kinds of soil. We also perform life cycle and carbon footprint analyses, and help them to achieve the highest result possible in terms of recycling or how best to fight plastic leaching into nature”, Bruno De Wilde explains.

This expertise is put to wider use. “We also control and audit sorting and recycling systems and installations to check whether they comply with the required standards. On top of all that, we are recognised worldwide by all certification bodies active in the field of biodegradable or compostable materials, member of standardisation and certification organisations like ISO and its European counterpart CEN, the official delegate on several international committees, project leaders in the development of new standards and involved in European sustainability projects. So we are in touch with day-to-day reality in the recycling business and aware of what direction regulation may be moving into.”

Worldwide reach

Normec OWS aims at the high end of the testing business, he stresses. “We are an atypical lab. Routine control or bulk testing is not our core business. We are specialised in domains like contract research laboratory testing for the development of new materials, with highly trained operators applying tests we often

Bruno De Wilde checking one of the 3,260 reactors Normec OWS has today.

Photo courtesy of Jo De Rammelaere.

developed in house. 95% of our testing happens under very strict confidentiality rules."

"We have built up thirty years of expertise in this area, testing thousands of samples for hundreds of clients from all around the world, defining the right methodology along the way. Quality and innovation are part of our DNA. And we are fully independent. This also explains our worldwide reach: in Ghent, we receive samples from all continents to deal with. In BCDE, 95% of our work is done for international customers. Multinationals active in the most diverse industries and with very large R&D departments of their own come knocking at our door. Because what we do is not ordinary. Biodegradability is a very complex issue, depending on a wide array of factors that determine if, how, and at what rate materials will disappear. Materials that disintegrate rapidly in certain soils will linger on for decades in other environments like sea water, for instance. There is also a lot of confusion in the debate: biobased does not necessarily mean biodegradable, to name one. And emotions run high on topics like packaging and plastics, sometimes at the cost of rationality. Not all plastics can be avoided – if only because they can be useful to prevent loss of food – or recycled. We should look at the numbers and try to strike the right balance. Perfect is the enemy of good."

Photo courtesy of Jo De Rammelaere.

Testing comes in all kinds of flavours and nature very often lends a hand… even if worms do not have any.

New location

In its former headquarters at the old ACEC compound at Dok Noord in Ghent, Normec OWS was bursting at its seams. “Our old premises allowed us to grow organically, adding new space every time an expansion was needed. But even if our growth rate has slowed after the corona pandemic due to fiercer competition, we were ever more struggling to cope with demand in the most efficient way possible”, Bruno De Wilde says. “We went looking for a new location, keeping in mind that we wanted to stay in Ghent, with its university and high schools that bring us the human potential we need. Furthermore, environmental concern is very vivid among our employees. Many come to work by bike.”

The right site for the new headquarters and main laboratories – OWS opened a small satellite laboratory in Kettering, Ohio in 2021 and has long-lasting collaborations with partners in Japan, China, and Taiwan – was found in the Pantserschipstraat, in the southernmost part of North Sea Port and at the northern fringe of Ghent, pretty close to Dok Noord. “We took our new quarters in existing buildings that offer three times more space, and we invested more than 4 million euros to transform them into the platform we need to further develop our activities.”

Take-over, split-off, and rebranding

In December 2020, OWS became a full subsidiary of Normec Group, a major Dutch actor in the testing, inspection, certification and compliance (TICC) industry. Founded in 2015, Normec has implemented a growth strategy based on external acquisitions to build an international TICC network. Today it has 30 locations in Europe and 4,000 employees. Subsidiaries are given the freedom to continue to grow independently, the group bringing them the support and leverage of a more comprehensive network.

The integration of OWS within Normec was rounded off last year with the rebranding of the Belgian company, which is now named Normec OWS and adopted a logo in line with the house style of the Normec organisation.

The take-over of OWS also came with the divestment of its engineering division, which was incorporated into a separate company called Dranco, which was not part of the acquisition of the laboratory activities of OWS by Normec. Dranco is now a world leading company in its own right in the construction and operation of anaerobic digestion plants and in organic waste management consultancy. Worldwide it has over thirty installations in 14 different countries with a total treatment capacity of over 1 million tonnes of organic waste. Dranco still operates from the former OWS site in Ghent.

Normec OWS makes the shift to its new location in two steps. In June, a large part of the 105 employees already moved to their new working spot. The rest will follow next year.

Extended capabilities

“This marks a new milestone in our journey”, the managing director business development of Normec OWS concludes. “This move comes with a host of benefits that will enable us to serve our clients even better. With the increased capacity, enhanced testing capabilities, and the room for future expansions, we will be able to maintain our position as the largest testing lab within the field of biodegradation, compostability, disintegration, and ecotoxicity testing. This will also help us to shorten the lead times for testing, providing faster results and being more responsive to our clients’ requirements.”

“And we now stand even closer to North Sea Port, which has a special focus on the biobased economy and a very diversified recycling cluster. We already cooperate actively with the Bio Base Plant, being their preferred partner for testing the sustainability of new processes and products. We perform controls at recycling plants sitting in the port area. This interaction is bound to grow. North Sea Port is the kind of environment we perfectly fit in.”

I. **NORMECOWS.COM**
I. **NORMECGROUP.COM**