

European Sealing Association: Striving to achieve what an individual member can't achieve on its own

Established in 1992, the European Sealing Association (ESA) has continuously represented manufacturers and suppliers of sealing devices in Europe. It has been at the forefront of standards development, influencing legislation and promoting environmental protection, and continues to grow in its numbers. Pump Engineer spoke with Mark Neal, Secretary General of the ESA, to learn more about sealing technology and to gain an insight into the aims of the association in an era that is becoming increasingly stringent.

By Deirdre Morgan, Editor

The ESA was initially set up by a number of competing manufacturers in order to deal with the requirement for companies to change from asbestos-based products to asbestos-free products by the year 2000. At that time, the alternative products that were available did not perform as well as asbestos-based products. Therefore, in order to meet the needs of the marketplace the founders of the ESA decided that manufacturers needed to combine forces and provide an effective, unified solution. "When influencing legislation or standards within the European Commission in Brussels, or when doing research and technical work, it is far better to collaborate on these issues, which affect everybody, than it is to go it alone or fund it independently," says Mark. "In fact, the European Commission prefers associations representing the voice of the sealing industry, rather than individual companies trying to lobby for a change in a particular direction. There are concerns that an individual company may have commercial interests at heart, whereas the ESA as a trade association with no commercial interest represents the overall industry."

By bringing all of these competitors together under the same umbrella of the ESA and splitting it into different divisions that are focused on specific product groups, the members can do joint research and help influence standards and legislation. "It's surprising that even though they are competitors, the members pull together really well. However, it's very technical-based – there are no commercial discussions due to competitive legislation. It tends to work quite well," he adds.

The core of communication

Mark took on the role of Secretary General in 2014 when Dr. Brian Ellis, one of the principal founders, retired from the position. Dr. Ellis was responsible for evolving the ESA from its conception up until the point of his retirement. The association has continued to grow and now has 55 members. Today, there are five divisions within the ESA: a Mechanical Seals division,



an Elastomeric and Polymeric Seals Division, an Expansion Joints Division, a Flange Gasket Division and a Packing Division. Whilst each of these divisions needs to work together to achieve common goals, interestingly, the ESA's management group is dispersed throughout Europe rather than being confined to one central location. Mark states that he is the hub for the daily activities of the ESA and adds that the Standards and Legislation Director is based in the UK, along with two of the Technical Directors and another in Germany. Adding to that, the executive committee, which is made up of the management group, consists of a Chairman, a Vice Chairman and a Treasurer, who are all based throughout Europe. Mark elaborates: "We meet once every quarter, usually in Germany, to discuss relevant issues; the day-to-day running of the ESA, what we're looking to achieve, basic issues such as membership fees, up-to-date thinking on standards and legislation,

and the committee will also set my objectives – what they would like to see in the ESA.”

As Mark is at the centre of the daily activities for the ESA, his typical day tends to revolve around organization and correspondence. Due to the ESA's involvement with the Fluid Sealing Association (FSA) in the USA, Mark often has to catch up on emails coming through from different time zones. Equally, a lot of manufacturers, such as ESA members, have interests, if not manufacturing facilities, in India or China. “Due to this, we're starting to see more enquiries come through from countries from outside Europe, our traditional base. As members may have interest here, we like to keep in touch with what's happening in their sealing industries as well.” In addition to this, Mark's responsibilities involve human resources duties, website management, accounts management and organizing meetings and exhibitions. Evidently, his role is diverse; it's not just one particular element that occupies his time but a whole range of activities throughout the day.

A knock-on effect

The sealing industry tends to be present in many sectors, meaning the oil and gas downturn did not have a direct impact on sales and profits for all ESA members. As Mark puts it, “It wasn't the be-all and end-all”. The flange gasket division, for example, supplies gaskets not just to the oil and gas sectors but also the water and automotive industries. They sell to manufacturers of pumps and valves, right through to radiator manufacturers. Therefore, these members are present in a huge spectrum of industries. However, some of the other divisions within the ESA, such as the mechanical seals division, may only be supplying to customers manufacturing pumps specific to the petrochemical industry. “In that instance, the oil and gas downturn has a significant impact because if their projects dry up like they have done in the last 4 or 5 years, that has a knock-on effect right down the line,” explains Mark. “Therefore, the pump manufacturers are less busy and are not manufacturing pumps so we as gasket and seal manufacturers are not supplying them with the same level of gaskets and seals that we would have in the past.” On the other hand, Mark is of the opinion that if there is investment in new plants then the old plant has to be maintained. The maintenance requirements will then increase because the older plant needs servicing on a more frequent basis. “The knock-on effect can occur in a positive or negative sense,” he states.

Installation, selection and developments

Undoubtedly, the ESA has a significant role to play when it comes to fugitive emissions and the increasing focus on standards and legislation. The IED13 Directive, which Mark explains is an industrial emissions directive, is one of the main focuses for the ESA. In relation to

this, Mark explains that the ESA is primarily involved with trying to keep the contents of a process system in the system and preventing it from leaking into the atmosphere. Adding to that, he outlines that technology is not the only important aspect, as installation is equally as significant. “If the product is not installed correctly the technology has limited impact as the product will still leak. Part of the IED Directive is about the correct installation and selection of products. Most of the divisions of the ESA have specialist training and installation manuals which focus on this. We want to have quite an impact in that area,” states Mark. “We want our interests to be represented in all of the new standards that are coming out that are applicable to our industry. Otherwise, somebody somewhere will make a decision based on the information they have and if that's inaccurate, then it could have huge ramifications for our members. Therefore, we like to be involved in everything that's going on.”

Keeping with the topic of standards and legislation work, Mark believes these are not only key priorities for the ESA but would also be major motivational aspects for members to join the association. “Research programs are a key aspect of the ESA,” he says. “One of the smallest divisions, the elastomeric and polymeric group, recently developed a research program that examined elastomers in cold temperatures. Although they are competitors, as a team they have developed a testing program in order to understand the behaviour of elastomers when being operated at low temperatures.” Mark further explains that understanding elastomers and their behaviour at low temperatures wasn't widely known. Over time the research group evolved this testing procedure to the point that it is now widely accepted. “That's just one example of some of the research that could take you places in each division,” he adds. Furthermore, whilst ESA members collaborate for standards development and more, Mark also highlights the importance of industry events such as conferences and trade shows. The networking opportunities that these events create are essential, as people value relationships, knowledge and experience.

It is evident that the ESA places a huge importance on benefiting the industry as a whole. Not only does the association collaborate with other associations for standards and legislation purposes, but additionally the ESA works with the FSA in producing manuals and installation guides, which are most often free of charge and accessible via the ESA website. Also, Mark highlights an upcoming incentive which will offer an updated installation procedure for one of the divisions within the ESA. “It's like a short animated film which is quite unique,” he says.

Being mindful going forward

Having spent the majority of his career in the sealing industry, it comes as no surprise that Mark is eager to





retain the knowledge and experience gained in the industry. There is now an area on the ESA website that focuses on careers, whether it be for job searching or employee searching, both ESA members and new university graduates can benefit. Many ESA members have graduate training programs and the ESA aims to promote and support them. “The intention is that we attract talented individuals from universities and encourage people with experience in the industry to stay in the industry. If, for whatever reason, they’ve lost their job or are moving to a different country, we want to be able to keep that talent within our industry, as well as

attract new individuals to join it,” explains Mark.

Going forward, Mark believes that globalization will be a determining factor for how the ESA develops and evolves. While at one time it used to just be the ESA that existed, there is now a China Sealing Association as well as the emergence of an Indian sealing association. Due to this, Mark concludes that this global growth is a key aspect for where the ESA intends to be in years to come: “We can’t operate in isolation because suppliers and manufacturers are not just European-based, they’re worldwide. The globalization of our industry is affecting what we do and we need to be mindful of that going forward.”



Mark Neal has been the Secretary General of the European Sealing Association since 2014. He has extensive experience in the sealing industry, having worked for Klinger and Econosto in the UK, and also served as a Managing Director of Novus Sealing before acquiring the company in 2002. He now resides in Geneva.