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BioValley – Life Sciences Cluster in the Centre of Europe

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Abstract: BioValley is a leading trinational biotech region in Europe covering the Alsace in France, Northwestern Switzerland and the region of South Baden in Germany. It is a unique location for highly successful developments in life sciences and biotechnology in Europe and an established network linking more than 40,000 people working in all areas of the life sciences and related industries. The goal of BioValley is to maintain a common culture, provide services, and enhance BioValley's profile in the whole world.

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History of BioValley

'Silicon Valley' have been household words ever since information technology achieved breakthroughs in the seventies. Small wonder therefore that the upper Rhine valley in the triangle of France, Germany, and Switzerland with its strong chemical and pharmaceutical industries inspired Swiss entrepreneur Dr. Georg Endress and Dr. Hans Briner, head of 'Regio Basiliensis', to create 'BioValley'. At the dawn of the biotechnology age this idea proved to be very foresighted.

In 1996 the merger of CIBA and SANDOZ into NOVARTIS in Basel led many scientists and managers to think about forming their own companies, supported by venture funds, most notably the Novartis Venture Fund.

For the BioValley initiative, this was the starting point for connecting and supporting young start-ups and company founders. The BioValley Promotion Team was elected to create BioValley products and organize events such as the trinational 'BioValley Round Tables' with representatives from Biotech companies and universities. Strategies to consolidate the BioValley network were elaborated.

In 1997 BioValley obtained a budget of € 2.2 million from the Interreg II Program of the European Union, cofinanced by regional authorities and private societies.

In 1998 the legal structures of BioValley were created, consisting of three national associations and a central tri-national association whose presidents today are:

- Prof. Philippe Poindron, Association Alsace BioValley,
- Dr. Raphael Vogler, BioValley Deutschland e.V.,
- Prof. Ernst Hungerbühler, BioValley Platform Basel,
- Dr. Bernd Dallmann, President of the BioValley Central Association.

In 2002 the Interreg III Program gave BioValley a further opportunity to establish the network until the end of 2005. The global amount is almost € 2.4 million. The program named: 'BioValley – from network to trinational biotech cluster' aims at setting up sustainable structures to support a cluster management offering a variety of services and maintaining the infrastructure.

BioValley – A Leading Bioregion in Europe

The principal constituents of the BioValley Initiative are the pharma- and biotech industries, the universities and various research institutions, the financial community, and the technology transfer offices. BioValley fulfils all main criteria considered as essential for a successful biocluster.

The BioValley offers excellent quality of higher education and research, ranking among the top three European bioregions, including 15,000 scientists in life sciences, 70,000 students, over 160 academic or public institutions and more than 400 research groups. The Universities of Strasbourg, Mulhouse, Freiburg, and Basel as well as the Universities of Applied Sciences in Offenburg and Basel offer many programs and opportunities. Five Nobel Prizes for research in chemistry and medicine have been awarded to scientists working in BioValley over the past 15 years.

There is a high density of world-class life science companies and start-ups in BioValley. Two major international pharma companies have their worldwide headquarters here: Novartis and Roche. Other global pharma and life science players present in BioValley are Eli Lilly, Sanofi-Synthelabo, DSM Nutritional Products, Amersham, Johnson & Johnson, Dow, DuPont, Syngenta, and Pfizer among others. Between 1997 and 2002, about 150 start-ups have been founded; many of them are spin-offs from pharma companies but also from academic research institutions. Approximately 300 biotech companies are located in the BioValley.

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BioValley affords a central location in Europe with easy and short communication ways, as well as all necessary facilities to set up a business. Several innovation parks in BioValley's territory are suited for biotech companies. These include the Innovation Parks in Allschwil, Reinach, and Witterswil near Basel (Switzerland), the Freiburg BioTechPark (Germany), the Innovation Centre in Lörrach (Germany), the Technopark in Offenburg (Germany), the Innovation Park in Illkirch near Strasbourg (France), Bio-incubator in Strasbourg (France), and the Technopole in Mulhouse (France).

BioValley Interreg III Program

The current Interreg III program mentioned above started in December 2002 and will finish at the end of 2005. The € 2.4 million have been raised in France by the Région Alsace, in Switzerland by the five Northwestern cantons, and in Germany by the government of Baden-Württemberg, economic promotion agencies of South Baden as well as private societies. For France and Germany the EU contributed matching funds, for non-EU member Switzerland the federal government provided the matching funds, allowing the Swiss to participate in an EU Interreg program thanks to the bilateral agreements.

While BioValley Interreg II was aimed at setting up the network, the current program will move BioValley from 'network to life sciences cluster' and will build self-sustaining structures without the need for public funding. A number of projects have been designed to reach this goal. In close collaboration with the BioValley Central Association, these projects are being realized by the BioValley Management Team consisting of the three national coordinators:

- Ms. Sylvie Debra, French coordinator,
- Dr. Susanne Daniel, German coordinator,
- Dr. Beat Glatthaar, Swiss coordinator.

This team reports to the BioValley Interreg Board, consisting of all co-financers. In practice, a six-member committee of the Board interacts with the management team and a 15-member BioValley Expert Team reviews the projects before they are submitted to the committee for funding.

BioValley Products and Services

BioValley Journal

Beside the four already published BioValley Journals in 2003, four more issues will be produced in 2004. The circulation is 5000 copies which are sent to the members of the BioValley associations and to many more addresses all over the world. The man-

aging editor of the journal is Dr. Petra Wirth, Alphatecnet in Grenzach-Wyhlen. She has an excellent expertise in biotech journalism and works closely with the BioValley Management Team and the general manager of the central association, Manfred Claassens.

BioValley Website

The new BioValley website www.biovalley.com has been online since the beginning of March 2004. The BioValley internet site includes an extranet providing customized services to members.

BioValley Profile Study

In a highly competitive environment for both research institutes and biotech companies, a clear profile of core competences in the BioValley has been developed. The study is currently being completed and will form the basis for marketing the BioValley region and ultimately for attracting further companies to this area.

Press Office

For permanent media relations the BioValley has installed a press office. Other tasks of the communication agency running the press office involve public relations and support for marketing and promotion.

BioValley Meetings

Frequent events organized by the BioValley associations are the national round tables (Stammtische). They cover scientific topics, economic questions and visits to member companies.

Call for Projects Program

Proposals have to concern projects in life sciences, economics, or education. Projects have to be realized within the BioValley area and have to be finalized by December 31, 2005. Of the submitted project proposals, seven have been chosen and funded. Trinational projects were given preference. A first review of the progress will be conducted at the end of November.

Start-up Labeling Program

A labeling program for start-ups is available within the Interreg III program. This program will financially support contacts between start-ups, investors and all sectors of expertise (intellectual property, business plans, scientific assessments, etc.). The aim is to ensure the sound development of new businesses. The application form including the criteria applied is available on the BioValley website.

BioValley Monographs

The BioValley Monographs are a collection of scientific essays and articles of scientists from the BioValley Universities of Basel, Freiburg, Mulhouse, and Strasbourg.

Participation at International Fairs 2003 and 2004

In 2003, the BioValley was represented at BioSquare in Lyon (April), at MipTec in Basel (May), and at BioExpo Japan in Tokyo (May). BioValley was present at the BIO in Washington (June) and there was a trinational booth at the Biotechnica in Hannover (October) and at the 11th European Congress on Biotechnology in Basel (August).

In 2004, the BioValley was again represented at BioSquare in Basel (March), at MipTec in Basel (May), at the BIO in San Francisco (June), and at Bio Japan in Tokyo (September), as well as at a number of local events.

BioValley cooperates with the national economic development agencies to promote the advantages of this unique region. Various promotion tools such as CDs and brochures have been produced and distributed widely.

BioValley Life Sciences Week

After the great success of the BioValley Life Sciences Weeks in October 2002 and 2003, this trinational event took place again in October 2004 in Basel, Strasbourg, Freiburg, and Lörrach. The program focusing on science, technology, economics, and finance included several expert panel discussions and reflects the state-of-the-art of the life sciences not only in the BioValley but worldwide. In 2005 the BioValley Life Sciences Week will be held again.

Outlook

Due to the presence of a major life sciences industry and four universities having strong programs focusing on life sciences, the BioValley has all the assets of an attractive life sciences cluster. On all counts, BioValley is among the top three bioregions of Europe even comparing favorably with the long existing bioregions of the US.

Still, there are a number of critical issues which have been addressed during the BioValley Life Sciences Week. These include the difficult economic climate preventing the sorely needed investments many start-ups require to survive, the difficult transition from the discovery phase to the later stages of clinical development, as well as lack of management experience of scientists turned entrepreneurs, to name a few.

On the bright side, BioValley is heavily engaged in promising future fields of the life sciences where the classical natural sciences including chemistry and physics now merge, namely systems biology and nanosciences.

These are the challenges many players in the BioValley face today. Strategies to meet them need to be elaborated. Several of these themes are dealt with in the articles of this issue of CHIMIA largely devoted to BioValley.