

## UK chemical industry seeks government support for expansion



The Chemistry Growth Strategy Group (CGSG) has put together an interim report showing how the UK chemical industry could grow by 50% in less than two decades. Set-up to examine how the chemical industry can continue to prosper in the current economic and industrial climate, the CGSG presented the report – ‘Strategy for Delivering Chemistry-fuelled Growth of the UK Economy’ – at a meeting on 10th July with Michael Fallon, Minister of State for Business and Enterprise.

As well as calling for rapid exploitation of shale gas, accelerating innovation, and rebuilding UK chemistry supply chains, the report also suggests that a partnership should be set up between the industry and government to tackle these three major priorities.

For instance, a part of the Chemical Growth Partnership's (CGP) role would be to help industry undertake projects to secure competitive energy and feedstock supplies, such as ensuring the development of unconventional gas resources. Accelerating innovation in the sector would also be crucial, as well as encouraging small and medium enterprises to help rebuild UK supply chains that have been eroded through the sourcing of cheaper, global suppliers.

## Manufacturers ready to invest in new kit

In a recent government-funded survey conducted by the Manufacturing Advisory Service (MAS), half of the 682 small and medium-sized manufacturing firms they contacted were planning to invest recent profit in new equipment and premises. That's a 12% rise on the same period of last year.

Moreover, 80% of the companies surveyed reported that investment in new products over the past 24 months has led to increased sales and profits. Encouragingly, 40% also indicated that they would be funding exploration into new technologies.

According to MAS area director David Caddle, it's a clear indication that companies are intent on remaining competitive through investment, with the aim of taking advantage of significant opportunities both at home and abroad. Indeed, MAS's own New Product Development programme has been specifically set-up to encourage innovation in SMEs, providing support in developing, validating, and bringing new ideas to market.



## Our £5,000 Engineering Challenge competition

The *ERIKS* Automation UK Engineering Challenge 2013, a new competition offering a prize of £5,000 worth of design time, has now been launched.

Entrants must submit an outline of an automation project they are currently building or improving. These submissions will then be judged by an expert panel including an *ERIKS* Automation specialist, with the winner and the two runners-up being announced in January 2014. The winner will receive up to £5,000 of design and development work (equivalent to 40 engineering hours). The winner, as well as two runners-up, will also receive a Land Rover Experience.

"Faster and improved innovation and development means a shorter time to market for the machine," says Andrew

Weaver, Application Engineer, Motion Control, *ERIKS* Automation UK. "That translates not only into a competitive advantage, but also in better financial results."

More information, including rules, terms and conditions and how to enter, can be found at [www.eriks.co.uk/automation](http://www.eriks.co.uk/automation). The downloadable registration form should be emailed to [sarah.evans@eriks.co.uk](mailto:sarah.evans@eriks.co.uk) by the competition closing date: 13th December 2013.



## Could 'powdered rain' make drought a thing of the past?

A powder capable of expanding up to 500 times its size when water is added may help plants survive and thrive in the middle of a drought.

Absorbing enormous amounts of water and releasing it slowly over a year, 'Solid Rain' is claimed to have the potential to overcome the global challenge of growing crops in arid conditions. The Solid Rain company responsible for the product has been selling it in its native Mexico for over ten years, and according to government tests there crop yields increased by up to 300% when it was added to the soil.

A type of absorbent polymer originally pioneered by the US Department of Agriculture (USDA) back in the 1970s, its most commercial application to date has been as an absorbent filler in disposable nappies. Mexican chemical engineer Sergio Jesus Rico Velasco, however, developed and patented a version that can be mixed in with soil to hold water; this can then be slowly released to feed crops, with a litre of water being absorbed by as little as 10 grams of the material.