



# WHY MY GRANDMOTHER PICKLED FRUITS IN SUMMER

Pavel Cech, ResourceCo Asia,  
Singapore, offers an alternative  
insight into the future of  
Alternative Fuels.



In the world where quarterly results have become a paramount indicator of performance, the short-term focus often causes a long-term disorientation. This transpires through strategic fuel sourcing decisions within the cement industry.

Observing the scene of the fossil fuel theatre and its reception by the cement auditorium,



**Pickling options for the future: Alternative Fuels ranges.**



**Processed Engineered Fuel (PEF).**



**Tyre Derived Fuel (TDF)**

I couldn't make heads or tails of what has been happening. Tragic scenes met with amusement, jokes and innuendos pass in an embarrassing silence and smart remarks vanish unnoticed or misunderstood. What is that?

The answer to my allegory dwells in the wiring of the human mind and the safe passage we all try to make. When a person wants to make a decision, he or she usually draws first on past personal experience,

then confronts that with the current reality and analyses the factors that might indicate how relevant the experience is under the actual circumstances. However, when a hierarchical organisation (where people frequently move on) needs to decide, the complexity of underlying interests frequently makes the current circumstances overwrite the past sensible and applicable experience. This difference between the individual and collective stock-taking is what makes cement companies decide to take such different directions as they face the fossil vs. alternative fuel (AF) dilemma.

So, this is where my grandma enters the fuel scene...

As a boy on the eastern side of the Iron Curtain that used to cut through Central Europe, I used to wonder why in the best time of the year, the long warm sunny days that invited everyone to enjoy the small yet great pleasures of simple life, my grandmother worked doubly hard, harvesting, preparing and preserving all the possible produce her little garden had offered. Along with all this work she still found some time to enjoy the summer around her preparations. Then, in the dead of the winter as the apples in the cellar got wrinkled, we appreciated apricot, strawberry and cherry compotes, vegetable chutneys or pickled onions.

Let me link this memory back with our cement fuel topic...

Nowadays, everyone within the cement industry has been benefiting directly and indirectly from the low cost of fossil energy as well as petcoke. The direct benefits are clear – the \$/GJ. Indirectly then, many other cost factors reduced subsequently. I.e. freight or electric power to mention the key ones. The low \$/GJ then brings down the reference against which the industry measures the economic viability of Alternative Fuels. People start asking questions like, 'Why should we go through all the trouble for nothing?' The answer seems apparent – there is no reason to trouble one's life without a payoff. However, this matter is not as simple as that. The fossil fuel cost is unsustainably low. It will go up and against all the nice looking slow predictable gradual graphs that we often see in strategic review documents and sourcing futures. Common sense tells us the change will instead be abrupt and will come in a shockwave instead of a gentle tide but it is hard to predict a spike, so for safety, we prefer a gradual and adjustable innocent spread of the effect. What will happen then if the 'shock' comes? An extended winter with no pickle in the cellar and everyone rushing to the same shop to get his dose of pickled vitamins. But the shop won't have enough stock and the logistics won't be ready to cater to such an abrupt demand! Those who had spent more time pickling will get through the winter with no damage and shall come out strong compared to those who enjoyed the summer to the fullest but are scurried and weak



**Loading of Alternative Fuel for transport to the kiln.**



**Unloading the Alternative Fuel via a kiln feed system.**

in the spring. As even John F Kennedy remarked to Congress at one of the State of the Union addresses, "The time to repair the roof is when the sun is shining."

The common sense (again) during the heyday, says to keep some of the benefit for rainy days or even better, to put it to work to create a competitive advantage or a better starting position when the period of cheap fossil fuel is over. Every road in this direction leads through sustainable energy. Whether it be waste preprocessing facilities or Alternative Fuel feed systems, waste heat dryers or waste heat power generation. It of course, depends on what the local specific market and regulatory conditions allow the cement company to do but the direction is obvious and undisputable.

If things are so clear and logical, straight forward and practical, why do so many reputable professional cement companies not follow this logic? For this, there are many reasons that one can imagine. Some of the spectators in the theatre simply don't get the message. Others might be focused on day-to-day process problems at hand and they don't want to get too strategic. Yet, many inside are well aware of the dilemma and its possible business impact but they have to withstand internal forces. Don't forget, it is sometimes hard to stand up and be the first one to start clapping hands. Often it is due to a pressure from the architects of disasters who portray the company success as a short or immediate capacity to generate profit at any cost. Yes, the matter is very complicated,

in business we need to deliver results but don't we jeopardise a lot of the future success on the account of delivering too much today?

Well, end of the philosophic narrative. Putting facts together, without making pickle parallels or theatre allegories, we are safe to believe that developing alternative energy is a tedious task that takes years of planning, designing, implementation and market development. Those who keep their foot in the door, who have got the feed systems, permits and the supply base ready and perhaps running at a base pace will be able to increase the scale to see immediate benefits the minute the fossil fuel price shoots up. The others will start scratching their heads, creating project teams, theses and studies, losing precious time and their crucial market position where supply cannot be propped up quickly in reaction to the unexpected demand. In AF we talk business development first and business later.

Without kicking the ball too far, I would like to appeal to those who are in business for the long run to revisit their AF strategy and do the right thing at the right moment. If you ask "What if an increase of the fossil fuel cost doesn't happen?" I offer a simple answer – You will have a longer payback of your AF project. How complicated does it sound? And, by-the-way, you will do something good for the planet and the sustainability of your industry. Isn't that, for a fall back, already a strong reason?

What used to be difficult one or two decades ago is materialising in front of us. The heavy and slow moving general mindset-shift towards green solutions and practices has reached most countries that had been, until recently, reluctant to take a step forward. Government bodies are more supportive, technologies have evolved, and the waste management sector understands that more sophisticated methods and resource recovery practices are inevitable for the sector's future prosperity. The cement industry by and large accepts AF as a given. In a relatively short span of time we have all witnessed a silent transformation of the cement fuel mix which moved from liquid fossil fuels to coal, on-boarded petcoke, introduced alternative fuels, reduced the quality requirements for coal and again, increased AF usage. This journey, if one can generalise a whole set of real-life cases, has still got a long road ahead. Fossil fuel might not be available everywhere whereas waste is, and if not in sufficient quantities, AF can travel and will travel like any other energy.

My message to cement professionals is actually an invitation to continue this intriguing AF and resource recovery journey. There is a new opportunity behind every corner. A few humps ahead should not make you stall the progress. You're changing the world by providing an essential building material, but you also change it deep within by cleaning up the mess that humanity causes. After two decades in the business I find it more fascinating than ever! 🌍