

End comes after 47 years: Voerde power plant taken out of service

One of Germany's largest hard coal fired power plants is taken off the grid // Employee program 'Out of work, into work' successful // Dismantling will take several years

Voerde. After 47 years, last Friday one of the largest hard-coal-fired power plant sites in Germany was officially taken out of service: the Voerde site on the Lower Rhine with the power plants Voerde A/B (1,522 MW) and West 1/2 (712 MW). The closure was a hard step for STEAG, and the last day of operation was a somber shift for the remaining 280 employees. Many of them had worked at the Voerde plant for more than 30 years. However, despite the consternation there was also good news: good solutions could be found for the people employed at the site.

"The common goal of STEAG management, works council and the responsible labor union IG BCE was to avoid layoffs and resultant unemployment and get people 'out of work, into work'," said Alfred Geissler, STEAG Executive Board Member and Industrial Relations Director, at a joint farewell event for the employees. "This succeeded in close, outstanding cooperation with the works council at the Voerde site and with tremendous effort on the part of the entire STEAG Group. Together with the works council here at the site, as first point of contact for our employees with their concerns, needs and fears, in close collaboration we sought and found acceptable solutions for every single employee," Geissler continued.

More than half of the workforce could be placed in jobs at other locations. Longer travel times to the new place of work and other tasks also were accepted. For instance, Thomas Wagener, the power plant manager up to now, is taking the place of the retiring head of the STEAG refinery power plant in Leuna. For every third employee socially acceptable solutions also were made possible in the form of early retirement and other retirement arrangements. Another ten percent of the staff are leaving the company for placement in external jobs, with financial support and professional assistance.

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However, not all employees will be leaving the power plant immediately. A team of power plant operators will carry out the necessary decommissioning work beginning in April: First, the plant will be put in a dry state, i.e., all liquids required for operation will be drained, collected and disposed of. This will take place in close cooperation with the appropriate authorities. Also, stocks will be disposed of, and a substitute must be provided for the remaining electricity requirements at the site. This decommissioning phase will take about six months according to the current plans.

Once the fuels and other consumables have been disposed of and the storage areas cleared, the so-called planning phase will begin in which the essential preliminary plans for dismantling will be made: along with traffic safety measures and site security this includes tender invitations for dismantling of the plant and plans for marketing the land for redevelopment. Post-operation activities during this period will ensure the treatment of surface water and the securing of outlying structures. During this period, activities will continue to be coordinated with authorities and municipalities. In the subsequent dismantling phase the plants will be deconstructed. Decisions then must be made as to which plant parts are suitable for recycling and which parts must be disposed of. The aim of dismantling is to establish a defined final condition, including all verifications required by the involved authorities.

Historical and economic data, Voerde power plant site

At the Voerde site, the power plant was erected in 1970/1971 with two units (West I and West II) with 350 MW each. They were followed in 1982 by unit A of Voerde (710 MW) and in 1985 by Voerde B, also with 710 MW. Both units were equipped with a flue gas desulfurization (FGD) plant. In 1987 the power plant units West I/II were retrofitted with such equipment. In 1989 the installation of nitrogen oxide reduction systems in both power plants followed. In December 2005 the two FGD systems at the Voerde power plant were partially replaced. This increased the capacity of each unit by 51 MW. The Voerde power plant site has three stacks that are 230, 218 and 250 meters tall. Running at full capacity the Voerde site could generate some 8.4 billion kilowatt-hours (kWh) of electricity annually, enough to satisfy the needs of 2.1 million single-family households. Not only electricity was produced at the Voerde power plant, however: power plant by-products like fly ash, bottom ash, slag-tap granulate and FGD gypsum found customers in the construction materials industry, helping to conserve natural resources.

Prior to the beginning of construction in the late 1960s, occasionally there was concern in the region that the power plant would rob the neighbors of breathable air within a radius of 25 kilometers or so. However, these worries proved unfounded. On the contrary, the power plant was well received by the population. On 'open day' when the power plant unit Voerde A was put into service 12,000 visitors came to the plant. To the very end the plant operated efficiently and environmentally friendly since major innovations in environmental technology often were introduced long before being required by changes in the laws. In the current Seville process for drawing up BAT (best available techniques) standards, the Voerde power plant even is listed as a European reference power plant.

Since the commissioning of the first power plant unit in 1970 the power plant site has generated a total of 366,426,982 MWh (366 terawatt-hours) of electricity. With this quantity of electricity it would be possible to supply power to the whole of Germany for six months or to the North Rhine-Westphalian capital city of Düsseldorf for about 300 years.

During the power plant's heyday in the 1980s and 1990s, STEAG employed around 550 people at the plant. During the regular major inspections there were as many as 600 more employees of external service providers at work on the plant grounds. They, too, contributed to the economic strength of Voerde, since during the weeks-long inspection periods they lived in the region surrounding the plant and bought their everyday necessities in the stores there. Thus, during the past years, 280 power plant employees (at last count) and their families as well as numerous business enterprises, most of them from the Lower Rhine region, could benefit from the power plant, along with the city of Voerde with its approximately 37,400 inhabitants and the municipality of Dinslaken.

About STEAG

STEAG GmbH has been active in power generation for almost 80 years now. As a business with international operations, STEAG offers its customers integrated solutions in the fields of electricity and heat production and engineering services. Our core competencies include design, construction and operation of both major power plants and distributed facilities, and the marketing of electricity from generating plants. Power generation is based on both fossil fuels and – for over a decade now – renewable energy sources.
