

SOURCE OF SCIENCE

Coresta's secretary general, Pierre-Marie Guitton, discusses the organization's evolving role in a changing industry.

By George Gay



Coresta has made huge strides in recent years in focusing on the important scientific questions that the tobacco industry needs to answer. This has not been an easy journey since it has meant venturing away from well-worn tracks toward difficult issues, such as tobacco and health, previously regarded as being off-limits by at least some of its members. Now, it has to strike out in further new directions, at least one of which will probably prove just as challenging for a body of scientists—it needs to indulge in a little self-promotion. *Tobacco Reporter* spoke recently with Pierre-Marie Guitton, Coresta's secretary general.

TR: When did you take over from François Jacob as secretary general?

Guitton: I was officially appointed by the Coresta Board during its meeting in Aix-en-Provence, in October 2009, and I started on Jan. 3, 2010, with François training me until the end of the financial year, March 31.

TR: What was your background?

Guitton: My educational background was in graphic design. I worked in B2B advertising departments in electro-mechanics, and then armaments, in the Paris area. But I wanted to leave Paris—and the arms business—and so I joined SWM (Kimberly-Clark Specialty Products at the time) in Le Mans in 1989.

TR: So did your work with SWM, as it now is, bring you

into contact with Coresta?

Guitton: I joined the tobacco industry in the R&D department of SWM, in charge of technical communication. This included the preparation of, among other things, scientific and commercial presentations—at a time when they comprised slides and transparencies. This means I did produce a number of documents for Coresta events, but without being fully aware of what Coresta was. Nine years later, I was transferred to the Malauçène tipping paper factory, where I eventually became head of the customers' technical services department. Malauçène, in Provence, was one of the "butt cemeteries" chosen by Coresta for a butt degradability study. And, of course, as a perforated paper producer, we used the Coresta unit for permeability measurements. However, I have discovered since then that Coresta had a much wider scope than that!

TR: What attracted you to an industry that was, even in 1989, under considerable pressure?

Guitton: At the time I joined SWM, I was in armaments and I felt that at least tobacco smoking involved personal choice. Then, once I started working for R&D scientists, I saw that a lot of work was done for the better understanding of all tobacco questions.

TR: What skills have you brought to the position of secretary general?

Guitton: As a nonscientist, designer and formerly in charge

of communication and training, one of my first jobs was to produce a leaflet describing what Coresta is. But I believe there is more to do in terms of explaining the scientific work of Coresta, and I am happy that today this is a clear strategy within the association and its members.

TR: In what ways will you be able to help move Coresta forward?

Gitton: Well, apart from what I just said, I am bringing an outsider's eye to the association's current rules, and this will allow me to put forward proposals about possible evolutions. Communication within Coresta and "selling" its value not only to the membership but to the outside world is going to be more and more important.

TR: You have been with Coresta for about a year and three-quarters; what impressions have you formed?

Gitton: Firstly, I was impressed with the work being done; the global reach of the studies and their scope: from crop genetics to consumers' behavior and its biological impact. Secondly, I was impressed by the great collaborative spirit between individuals who belong to competitive organizations but who do share knowledge to help the whole industry. Everyone is ready to listen to the others' ideas, and if they challenge findings, they do so in a very positive way.

TR: Do you think there is need for change?

Gitton: With 180 members, a great cultural or structural diversity and a biannual pace, Coresta is like a tanker that cannot make sharp turns. But what could change is the ability to change!

I don't believe in changing for the sake of changing. However, as an outsider, I can see a few things that insiders don't see anymore, and the most obvious change has been needed for the past few years. We are about to launch a renewed website to improve Coresta's communications. We want to share in a public area more information about association news and internal events; to offer members a private platform where they can access documents as soon as they are available; and to provide for group participants a discussion forum with document workflows. And Coresta could become an important source of tobacco science when it comes to defining product regulation, which is now our environment.

TR: What sorts of changes would you like to see?

Gitton: I would like to see more companies joining! And to facilitate this, we aim to show what, in an increasingly regulated environment, Coresta can offer all stakeholders dealing with tobacco issues, whether they are producers, growers, laboratories ... or regulators. As an example, for some ISO [International Organization for Standardization] projects, only Coresta can provide the structure to produce factual data and develop standard methods. I am sorry when some organizations—but not all—step back when the word *tobacco* is pronounced. Discussion is the basis for understanding.

And I believe we have some work to do toward harmo-

nizing vocabulary and documentation. This is not only about cosmetics; such things will help newcomers to understand the ongoing work. Rules tend to drift away with time, and we need to bring them back. The new website will help in this matter.

We will need to be more proactive on scientific issues. Coresta is not the voice of the industry, but could be the central point of tobacco science.

TR: Coresta is an association that was founded 55 years ago to promote international cooperation in scientific research relative to tobacco. Do you think that even its title has become somewhat outdated and that, in the future, some separate mention will have to be made in relation to nicotine?

Gitton: Well, nicotine is part of tobacco. I would understand your question if it were the other way around: expand from nicotine to whole tobacco. I agree that the full name of Coresta is a bit long, but it describes exactly what Coresta is dedicated to. The various objectives are discussed by the Scientific Commission, based on the board's guidelines so as to meet the needs of the whole industry.

TR: I had more in mind new nicotine, tobacco-free products. Have any moves been made by Coresta to try to attract the suppliers of nicotine-based products such as e-cigarettes, whether those companies are offshoots of tobacco manufacturers or not?

Gitton: To date, no move has been made either way. I believe any candidate in this respect would be welcome, as long as their scientific activities are compatible with Coresta's mission.

TR: Is there any other way in which Coresta's membership base should be widened?

Gitton: We have made moves toward regulatory and health organizations, and representatives of some of these bodies now attend Coresta meetings. You know that the 2010 Coresta Congress was opened by Dr. David Ashley, director of the office of science at the Center for Tobacco Products of the U.S. Food and Drug Administration.

Coresta executives had a meeting with Dr. Ashley's team in Washington in January, and you can see the report on our website, under Regulatory Affairs. One U.S. government laboratory has shown interest in joining, and we will gladly welcome them, and others.

TR: Do you think that it makes sense to retain the four separate study groups as they are currently composed? Or do you think that specializations in, for instance, the field of biology, and, indeed, the rise of nicotine products, mean that it is time to revisit these groups?

Gitton: Some changes have occurred; study groups have been renamed and work redistributed. Today, it is clear that the Agronomy and Phytopathology study groups are very much linked and may sometimes overlap. It could make sense to merge them, but there would be little real benefit. ►

Product Technology is a huge study group, and some of its subgroups and task forces are growing. We talked about splitting them, but the participants would be the same, so why duplicate the executives? A new committee is under construction now, to address overall scientific and regulatory issues.

At every congress, we run elections and there is a turnover in the Scientific Commission; and at that time the list of groups and objectives is reviewed and adjusted. New subjects for study, such as quantitative risk assessment, are discussed at that time. Another topic is sustainability, and a very promising workshop will be held in Santiago to build such a group. We know that a lot of top stakeholder executives will attend.

TR: Perhaps new subjects should be catered for by forming subgroups, such as that to do with snus?

Guillon: Today, I am sure that the subgroup/task force structure is well-adapted to address the industry's needs, and potential new areas of work are constantly being discussed. The Smokeless Tobacco subgroup was created in 2009 to address this rapidly emerging interest, which takes in snus. Of course, the pace is sometimes slow because the participants in Coresta also have "regular" jobs. But their managers and their company executives need to understand that working for Coresta is also working for their company's future—that Coresta time is a necessary investment.

TR: What are the most important fields of research currently being undertaken by Coresta?

Guillon: I am afraid that quoting some will make me unpopular with those who work on others! On the Smoke Science side, biomarkers comprise a strong theme. In Product Technology, I would say that the whole LIP cigarettes issue is a great concern that is shared with the ISO. Smokeless Tobacco has been very active classifying products, and producing methods and reference material. Agronomy is working with TSNAs and agrochemicals—

here again with Coresta being a globally recognized reference. And Phytopathology is bringing together a huge sum of knowledge on diseases, pests and subsequent sustainable treatments based on worldwide studies.

TR: During the past 20 years, the industry has undergone tremendous consolidation, which has brought advantages and disadvantages. One obvious advantage is that the bigger companies that play a role in Coresta are able to support the staging of impressive congresses, as was evident in Edinburgh last year. But there is a limited number of such companies; so are we likely to see fewer meetings in the years ahead?

Guillon: I really do not think so, because these companies also bring a great support to Coresta on a day-to-day basis. Congresses are held every two years, which means that some eight to 10 years elapse between these events in so far as each major company is concerned. And hosting a congress is also a valuable event for the company itself.

The Study Group joint meetings every other year may be held by smaller companies, sometimes participating in no group at all, but wishing to do their part.

Smoke Science and Product Technology meetings should not be an issue. However, we are more concerned about Agronomy and Phytopathology meetings, where scientists feel that their elders are leaving and, maybe due to the nature of the crop, too few new scientists are willing to become involved with it. There again, the whole industry needs to support this part of the science so as to meet the final requirements of tobacco products. We are thinking of other ways to run the Agro-Phyto events.

TR: Already, some meetings have been staged by Coresta rather than by a host company: perhaps this is the case with the upcoming Agro-Phyto meeting in Santiago. Are we likely to see more such meetings in the future?

Guillon: As I explained, companies play their roles in host-

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ing meetings very well. Coresta did organize an Agronomy-Phytopathology meeting in Krakow in 2007, together with the Polish Institute of Soil Science and Plant Cultivation, and the local Polish tobacco industry; and we also hosted a Smoke Science and Product Technology meeting in Aix-en-Provence in 2009. Santiago, AP2011, is hosted by a non-Coresta member, which proves the interest of all stakeholders. Coresta can act as a backup or a partner, but I am confident that members will keep considering that hosting meetings is in their interest. Perhaps *Tobacco Reporter* might like to be a host one day?

TR: If we are to see more Coresta-backed events, does it matter?

Guillon: Actually, it does not. It is more work for us, and since we are only a nonprofit organization with limited resources, we cannot provide as much on the social side. But scientifically speaking, it is not a problem.

TR: Is it the case that the really important work is done collaboratively, away from the meetings?

Guillon: Two hundred percent yes. And this is what we need to promote better. There are currently 17 groups, plus the Agro-Chemical Advisory Committee, and four potential new groups are being discussed. That involves over 500 participants all together. Each of these teams meet one to four times per year, and a lot of collaborative work is done in between their meetings. Apart from the papers presented by individuals or teams, congresses and meetings report on the work done by these groups.

TR: Is it possible that Coresta might have to return to having more than one official working language at meetings? I am thinking here, especially, about Chinese.

Guillon: This has not been discussed. Coresta is a French association, but decided in 2000 that the unique language would be English, due to translation costs. For the same reason, it is not likely that we will add a new language. Now I understand that it would be more welcoming for Chinese organizations. However, the Chinese scientists have worked a lot on their English and it was a great recognition for them to see that a large number of the participants in the last meeting in Graz attended the last session, with mostly Chinese papers, proving both interest in the topics they presented and an understanding of their presentations.

TR: Are you able to tell me how Coresta's membership is holding up?

Guillon: Since the 1990s, membership has seen an average of above 180 member organizations. It reached 198 and decreased after some mergers, but a number of independent laboratories have joined. Every year there is a turnover of more or less 10 members.

TR: And how about its finances?

Guillon: They are stable, with a reasonable reserve that helps, for example, the development of the new website or dedicated grants.

TR: Do you think that the tobacco industry has a good future given that, in some cities of some countries, smoking is banned at work, in restaurants and bars, in indoor and outdoor recreational facilities, and in private homes?

Guillon: Yes. You know that a small increase in China or India, linked to a better standard of living, can balance the decrease in Europe or North America. And the decrease is slowing down. Some smokers also have a tendency to compensate when they walk outside to have a smoke. Furthermore, there will be a progressive shift to new products. The industry has started to adapt.

TR: Do you think that, given all of this, Coresta has a good future?

Guillon: No doubt. There will be more and more regulations, more and more need for scientific evidence, more and more need for measurement standards, and Coresta is the only place where worldwide resources, representing all parts of the tobacco industry, can be dedicated to such studies; so yes, very much so.

TR: What will be the important work undertaken by Coresta in the near future?

Guillon: Providing regulatory bodies with the sound data they need, in whatever field they need it, and preparing to gather this data before they ask for it.

TR: The next congress is going to be held in Japan, I believe.

Guillon: Yes, in Sapporo on Hokkaido Island, at the kind invitation of Japan Tobacco Inc. I visited the venue a month ago, my first trip to Japan, and I was impressed by the level of preparation they already had achieved, a year ahead of time.

TR: Is there anything else that you would like to tell me about Coresta and your role with it?

Guillon: I have been pleased to talk with you and to try to answer your questions as best as I could. During the meeting in Graz, I was told by newcomers that the standard of science presented there was very high, and in some ways at the pharmaceutical industry level.

Participants come from companies or organizations that can be fierce competitors on the product development and marketing sides, but when it comes to science, they do work together to answer questions and benefit the whole tobacco chain, from farmers to manufacturers to regulators.

One of Coresta's objectives is also to develop recommended methods. This is the only way to make sure that results are comparable. And Coresta offers the best network of laboratories required for developing new methods.

All this is worth being done and worth being communicated, and I hope that *Tobacco Reporter* can contribute with reporting on Coresta's activities. I will be happy to help when you do so.

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