



PRESS RELEASE

Prague 19. 3. 2010

Developed economies support clusters

Regions are the driving force behind a strong national economy. Regional economic performance can be significantly enhanced through the synergic effect of clusters. These organizations represent a key tool for regional development, helping to boost and maximize competitiveness. Pavla Břusková, the Director of Ostrava's Regional Development Agency, explains the challenges currently facing Czech clusters: "We face several issues: public awareness of clusters in the Czech Republic remains quite low; our clusters are still not taking full advantage of opportunities for collaboration and coordination with European partners; and Czech clusters still have rather a low profile abroad. In order to address these challenges we have set up the National Cluster Association (NCA), which was officially founded on Thursday at its first general meeting in Prague." Dr Břusková has wide-ranging experience of cluster initiatives and cluster policy, and has coordinated the establishment of the new association from the earliest planning stages.

The founding meeting of the NCA was attended by all 17 founder members. The association gathers together cluster organizations from across the Czech Republic, putting them in direct contact with universities and a range of other NCA partners in order to drive forward competitiveness in the national economy by strengthening knowledge and innovation potential.

The opening seminar was held under the auspices of the European Enterprise Network, part of the Technology Centre at the Czech Republic's Academy of Sciences. Delegates from the NCA's founder members gained valuable new insights into support for clusters within the EU, the USA and Japan. Pavla Břusková gives more details: "The US administration's 2011 budget sends out a clear message to all of us: that high-achieving, competitive regional economies are essential to a strong national economy, and that clusters play a decisive role in boosting regional economic performance."

Guided by these principles, the new US national budget includes plans to support regional industry and innovation clusters through a range of federal departments and agencies. Funds will be allocated to help achieve the strategic goals of individual departments through a range of cluster initiatives: maximizing regions' competitive strengths to support job creation and economic growth; coordinating resources for business counselling, training and mentoring to help increase the participation of SMEs in regional clusters; facilitating regional collaboration among education and training providers and employers to strengthen lucrative high-demand professions; involving university staff and students across all disciplines in order to help boost the impact of promising innovations through commercialization, industry alliances, start-ups and the harnessing of talent; and promoting economic opportunities in rural communities via regional innovation initiatives which maximize positive impacts on the local and regional level.



The key strengths of clusters stem from their core values: openness, sharing, communication, creativity and dynamism. By harnessing the synergic potential of a wide range of organizations – businesses, education providers, research institutions and the public sector – clusters exist to coordinate joint projects which help to break down barriers to development in specific sectors and achieve new strategic goals. It is this single-minded focus on specific goals that sets clusters apart from more traditional industry or professional associations.

NCA President Pavla Břusková describes the core mission of the association: “The Czech Republic already has a large community of clusters, each of them with between 15 and 60 members – mainly commercial companies, but also universities and a range of other support organizations. What we don’t yet know is precisely how many clusters and partners there are – because until now there has never been a unifying platform for cluster initiatives on a nationwide scale.” The web portal www.nca.cz will play a key role in mapping and promoting Czech clusters as well as helping to foster international linkages and collaboration.

The ‘Cooperation’ programme, part of the OP Enterprise and Innovation, has already helped manufacturing and IT clusters to grow and develop, channelling over CZK 700 million to 20 cluster organizations to fund joint development projects in the programme’s first phase. However, access to start-up funding remains a problem for clusters in other sectors – such as tourism, spa services, transport, health care, education, or creative industries. In the words of Pavla Břusková, who was elected President of the NCA for its first year of operation: “It is essential for the Czech government to take a broad-based approach to cluster policy. In the National Cluster Association, the government already has an ideal partner for implementing policy in this vital area.”