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International FoodTec Award 2027: Holistic Networking: Focus on Automation and AI

Interview with two experts of the jury of the renowned technology award – Applications open until May 4, 2026 at: www.foodtecaward.com

Automation, digitalization, and AI now support virtually all areas of food processing. The packaging industry, in particular, benefits from the broad range of innovations in robotics and new packaging materials. Two experts share their insights on current developments and "sustainable productivity growth": Prof. Dr.-Ing. Peter Burggräf, MBA, Professor at the University of Siegen, Faculty IV, Department of Mechanical Engineering, Chair of International Production Engineering and Management, and Prof. Dr. Markus Schmid, Professor at Albstadt-Sigmaringen University of Applied Sciences, Faculty of Life Sciences, Head of the Sustainable Packaging Institute (SPI). As members of the international expert jury for the International FoodTec Award, which will be presented at Anuga FoodTec in Cologne in 2027, they evaluate technological innovations with regard to practical application, efficiency, and sustainability. Applications for the prestigious DLG (German Agricultural Society) technology award are possible until May 4, 2026.

What significance do innovation awards have for your field?

Prof. Dr.-Ing. Peter Burggräf: Innovation awards highlight technical innovations and advancements. In Germany, we face the major challenge of making the leap into a new era of innovation. Innovation awards help to focus attention on new technologies and opportunities in future markets. This stimulates progress within industries and, ideally, initiates a continuous improvement process. I want to help shaping this process and I am therefore happy to contribute my expertise as a jury member for the International FoodTec Award.

Prof. Dr. Markus Schmid: For me, innovation awards like the IFTA send an important signal to the industry and to our society: They showcase what is technologically possible and foster trust

in new solutions. Particularly in packaging technology, we see how innovations combine product protection, sustainability, and convenience. We are also driving such developments forward at SPI in various projects – and an award at the international level supports precisely this visibility.

The German Agricultural Society (DLG) has recently introduced the concept of "sustainable productivity growth" into the discourse. What does this mean for the field of automation and digitalization?

Prof. Dr.-Ing. Peter Burggräf: “Sustainable productivity growth” in food processing are virtually inconceivable today without digitalization and automation. They support transparent and sustainable food supply chain management. This begins with production and sales planning. AI-supported predictive models based on weather data, consumer behavior, and past experience enable demand-oriented production planning. Automated machines and systems promote sustainability by conserving resources and reducing CO2 emissions.

Furthermore, sensors and intelligent process controls help to avoid overproduction and food waste. In addition, IT-supported quality controls relieve the burden on skilled workers and optimize quality assurance. Quality defects can thus be detected and rectified early. Automation can also take over physically demanding or dangerous tasks, thereby increasing workplace safety.

Both digitalization and automation ultimately lead to increased efficiency in all areas and enable precise and error-free production, both in terms of quantity planning and the quality of the final products. And when the technical possibilities of the circular economy in manufacturing are also considered, further sustainable productivity increases in food processing can be achieved.

Prof. Dr. Markus Schmid: For me, “sustainable productivity growth” means always linking efficiency gains with resource conservation and circularity. Automation and digitalization are crucial levers here – this could be through predictive maintenance, smart traceability, or AI-supported process optimization. At SPI, for example, we are working on precisely these kinds of questions in projects like KIOptiPack, BiosuPPack, and PLAMINPACK: How can new materials and digital processes be combined in such a way that productivity and sustainability go hand in hand in the sense of a more sustainable, circular bioeconomy?

What technologies do you expect to see among the applications or candidates for the Food Technology Innovation Award in your field?

Prof. Dr.-Ing. Peter Burggräf: All technologies that further advance automation, and thus also control engineering and information processing, are welcome.

These include, for example, software programs and AI models, or intelligent sensors that can be used in production—to automate and monitor machines and systems, and, if necessary, to resolve malfunctions independently or in collaboration with specialists. I am also very interested in solutions that use the collected data to train AI systems and thus further advance intelligent and automated production control.

Prof. Dr. Markus Schmid: I expect a wide range of applications – from robotic pick-and-place solutions and intelligent conveyor and logistics systems to smart packaging with integrated sensors. It will be particularly exciting where automation, digitalization, and new materials come together. In our projects, we see that industry is increasingly working on holistic concepts: materials, processes, and circular economy strategies are being networked and considered across value chains. I expect to see precisely these kinds of holistic solutions in the applications for the Innovation Award.

For additional information, go to: DLG e.V., Fachzentrum Landwirtschaft & Lebensmittel (Competence Center Agriculture and Food), Bianca Schneider-Häder, Eschborner Landstraße 122, 60489 Frankfurt am Main, Phone +49-(0)69-24788-360, IFTA@DLG.org and online at: <https://www.dlg.org/en/food/awards/foodtec-award>

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DLG. Progress and sustainability in agriculture and the food industry

The DLG (Deutsche Landwirtschafts-Gesellschaft e.V. - German Agricultural Society), founded in 1885 by Max Eyth, stands for productivity and resource conservation in a sustainable and innovation-friendly agricultural and food value chain. The goal of the DLG is to promote progress through the transfer of knowledge, quality and technology. The DLG has more than 31,000 members, is a non-profit organisation, politically independent and internationally networked. As one of the leading organisations in its industry, the DLG organises trade fairs and events in the fields of agriculture and food technology and tests food, agricultural machinery and farm inputs. With its Competence Center Agriculture and Food and the media of the DLG publishers, the DLG stands for independent know-how transfer. In addition, the DLG works in numerous national and international expert committees to develop solutions for the challenges facing the agricultural, agri-food and food industries. www.dlg.org