

Ube Industries to Continue Separator Business Expansion under New Plan

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Ube Industries is pushing ahead with two projects to strengthen its business in battery materials, whose core products are separators and electrolytes, under its upcoming medium-term management plan, to start in fiscal 2013. It also intends to study the establishment of an overseas production base for lithium-ion-battery separators in Asia, Europe or the US, under the plan.

The first project is the addition of a second domestic production facility for the company's dry-process polyolefin separators for rechargeable lithium-ion batteries. The facility in its Sakai plant in Osaka Prefecture is scheduled to begin production in early fiscal 2013, joining existing production in its Ube plant in Yamaguchi Prefecture. The goal is to raise the total annual output capacity to 200 mn m² in a phased manner.

The second project is the production of films coated with inorganic fine particles to serve as separators with higher heat resistance and other beneficial properties than non-coated films. Ube Maxell, a joint venture, is to start production by the end of 2013 in Kyoto Prefecture.

Ube Industries adopted a strategy for its separator business that concentrates on applications in the lithium-ion batteries of hybrid electric vehicles and plug-in hybrid electric vehicles, rather than electric vehicles. According to a company official, because its separator production capacity is still fairly small, and hybrid electric vehicles are proving more popular than the others, the company is enjoying higher capacity utilization than its rivals that focused on electric vehicles and PHEVs.

Even though demand for electric-vehicle lithium-ion batteries has yet to take off, the market for medium- to large-sized lithium-ion batteries, mainly for automobiles, is expected to expand. The two projects are in anticipation of demand for these batteries' separators exceeding supply in the near future.

Ube Maxell was formed in 2011 as a joint venture with Hitachi Maxell with the aim of combining Ube Industries' expertise in separator production and Hitachi Maxell's film-coating technologies to develop high-performance films to use as separators in high-end applications. The new Sakai plant, which is located in a prefecture adjacent to Kyoto, will supply the joint venture with material for the coated films.

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