

Silver linings: COVID-19 results in stronger collaboration, better information sharing and quicker outcomes

Like many industries, the offshore oil and gas sector has responded to COVID-19 by adopting and applying new approaches to ensure critical business continuity and the health of its people under unprecedented and challenging circumstances.

As the offshore energy regulator, NOPSEMA has responded to the threat by drawing on improved techniques and the collective efforts of industry and other regulators internationally to diversify the way it does compliance monitoring of industry risks.

NOPSEMA CEO, Stuart Smith says the pandemic has resulted in a greater willingness for stakeholders, including industry, government, workplace representatives and regulatory bodies in Australia and overseas, to share information to deal with problems collectively, leading to faster and improved results.

“The cooperation we have had from all groups has been excellent. There’s been a greater level of collaboration than traditionally occurs across the industry and the experience we’ve had with COVID-19 in that regard has been of benefit to everyone,” Mr Smith said.

“For example, there has been greater collaboration and interaction between industry players such as operators of offshore facilities and the union movement. Workforce concerns are being picked up and addressed earlier. Interaction between the operators



and regulators has also been occurring more frequently, and that’s enabled issues to be dealt with quickly and flexibly as well.”

During the pandemic, NOPSEMA has leveraged strengthened relationships with offshore Health and Safety Representatives (HSRs) in assessing and investigating concerns regarding changes to workplace arrangements to manage risks associated with COVID-19.

Some operators have introduced special quarantine and isolation provisions for workers before they travel offshore to reduce the risks of transmission of COVID-19. Other measures include consideration of different roster patterns that involve various periods offshore.

While NOPSEMA acknowledges that changes to roster arrangements are an important consideration in managing the risks of COVID-19, NOPSEMA notes that operators need to ensure that the associated impacts of fatigue and psychological hazards are taken into account, documented and involve extensive consultation involving Health and Safety Representatives and other workforce representatives.

“It’s the responsibility of the operators of offshore facilities to operate in accordance with their safety case so the workforce, including the HSRs, have a role in seeing

what’s happening and recognising compliance or non-compliance and they can bring that to our attention,” Mr Smith said.

To highlight this emerging issue, NOPSEMA recently published a Safety Alert regarding COVID-19 roster changes to its website. The Safety Alert was recently updated to provide reference to a Wellbeing Framework developed by industry representative body Australian Petroleum Production and Exploration Association and supported by operator/contractor organisation Safer Together.

Collaboration in responding to this issue has helped overcome the challenges of distance and isolation so widely experienced during the pandemic. Following consultation, NOPSEMA responded to concerns from workers in relation to proposed roster changes. NOPSEMA has encouraged operators to engage with worker groups and unions early in the process so all parties have clarity of the changes being proposed and additional controls being implemented to reduce fatigue and psychological risks. NOPSEMA considers that significantly extending periods offshore, particularly in such challenging times where members of the workforce are concerned about the wellbeing of family members, may pose other risks that also require careful management.

“As a result of increased interaction and stronger collaboration, we’ve achieved better and faster outcomes. Lessons from this experience reinforce the importance of communication and having appropriate forums in place and up and running early,” Mr Smith said.

“Instead of being constrained by the way things have always been done, it’s evident that members of the offshore oil and gas sector are willing to consider different approaches to solving problems. That’s been

a useful cultural change and it’s a change that I, and others across industry, would like to see continue for future challenges. “

This approach has been shared with the International Regulators' Forum (IRF) and endorsed by jurisdictions represented on the Forum.

“At NOPSEMA, we’ve really valued the input we’ve received from other members from IRF. We’ve shared our experiences with other jurisdictions within the IRF and they’ve been happy to share their experiences. This sharing has given us the opportunity to test whether our approach is amongst leading practice” Mr Smith said.

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“Where there are lessons in other jurisdictions, we’ve sought to apply them in Australia and that’s particularly important for the oil and gas industry and for operators internationally. They want to know that whatever systems are being put in place in Australia are among the leading practices globally. This creates the opportunity to apply the best practices elsewhere, reducing risks for the workforce.

“The IRF has been a mechanism for us to coordinate responses even though individual regulators are responsible for their own jurisdiction. We’ve been able to share experiences and that’s led to a more consistent approach internationally and I think a better approach internationally.”