

Sea change

The North Sea's ageing infrastructure poses many challenges when it comes to maintenance and decommissioning. **Bob Lauder** of Oil & Gas UK explains to Nigel Ash why he believes that the associated health and safety issues are covered by best-in-class regulations and procedures.

Early in his career, Bob Lauder spent two years working as a safety inspector on Occidental's Piper Alpha platform, the 1988 catastrophic destruction of which led to the Cullen enquiry and the transformation of offshore regulation and best practice.

Cullen's 106 recommendations have informed UK offshore operations ever since, signalling a move away from prescriptive regulation on safety controls and towards a goal-setting regime, with the safety case underpinning all operations. "Cullen really sharpened our focus on the major accident potential that we had been living with, but not recognising as well as we should have done," says Lauder. "For sure workplace risk was always a focus. It wasn't that we didn't recognise the danger of hydrocarbons; we just didn't fully appreciate the extent to which controls were necessary."

Nearly a quarter of a century on and the Macondo loss in the Gulf of Mexico again shook the health and safety community. "In relation to safety, at the moment we are taking another hard look at how we manage major accidents and at the regulatory regime we use to help us control those risks," says Lauder.

Bob Lauder

Bob Lauder is health and safety issues manager with Oil & Gas UK. Between 1994 and 2008 he held a number of health and safety management positions with Talisman, CNR International and Kvaerner. In 2008 Lauder moved into independent safety consultancy, primarily with London-based Tullow Oil, before joining Oil & Gas UK in 2011.

Oil and Gas UK's Oil Spill Prevention and Response Advisory Group (OSPRAG) has been re-examining first response procedure for personnel protection in the light of Macondo. Its report, due out before the end of this year, will also cover pan-North Sea response to major disasters, including spill containment.

However, another Oil and Gas UK initiative will, according to Lauder, be permanent. The Well Life-Cycle Practices Forum (WLCPF) is a network of senior drilling personnel from North Sea oil companies. "They are undertaking a root and branch review of how we plan exploration and development drilling activity, as well as all the controls around that, and how we prepare for mishaps during a well programme," he says.

The next step

Fundamental to health and safety has been the company's Step Change in Safety initiative, now 14 years old. It aims to recognise and reduce hazards to workers

while encouraging them to take personal responsibility for their own safety and that of others. It also focuses on asset integrity.

Step Change in Safety dovetails into the UK Health and Safety Executive's Key Programme 4 (KP4) running from 2010-14. This focuses on ageing equipment and asset life extension. Unlike its predecessor KP3, it focuses on the offshore industry's need to take action now to ensure future safety. Coupled with an inspection and shortcoming rectification regime, KP4 aims to establish a common approach to the management of ageing installations and to promote ageing issues as a distinct activity within asset management.

Lauder is a member of the KP4 work group established by Oil and Gas UK. Its recommendations concerning the management of asset ageing are due this year. "We're looking at how to handle degradation, which is almost a natural effect of ageing," explains Lauder. "We are also looking at obsolescence and spare parts. You need to be smart and know

how long you want a piece of kit to be operational, as you will need a spares inventory that will allow you to see out the lifespan.

“Organisational issues are also a focus – it’s not all about the hardware. In some ways the hardware is the easy bit, as it requires only inspection and maintenance.”

The work group is examining how organisations cope with change, such as workers moving or retiring and the sometimes neglected issues surrounding succession planning.

The dangers of dismantlement

The North Sea industry is also moving into new territory with the decommissioning of installations. Lauder points out that, even with the first-generation facilities in the 1970s, the decommissioning had been factored into the asset’s lifecycle.

The UK Health and Safety Executive requires that ‘dismantlement’ be preceded by a safety case incorporating hazard identification and controls. Similarly, on

the environmental side, an impact assessment and environmental statement must be produced and approved.

“When planning a decommissioning, you don’t decide this month that you are going to do it next month,” he says. “Your cessation of production is normally set way in advance. You assemble your project team. A big part of the planning for a decommissioning is dealing with the health and safety component.

“There is no doubt that when you get into dismantlement, you are moving into hazardous areas as you are breaking into pipework and vessels that have contained dangerous materials. This requires a lot of preparation and careful control. Because you are going to alter the physical condition of the installation, maintaining access and egress becomes in itself something that has to be managed.”

However Lauder avers that the issues are not unknown, are reasonably well understood and that the industry has the means to manage them. Taking an overall

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The average age of North Sea workers is around 42. Lauder says of health and safety induction for new graduates and apprentices arriving to work offshore: “The easiest thing that you could ever do is to sell safety to a new entrant in our business.” He also notes that many young recruits now want to know about the environmental record of potential oil industry employers as they have grown up believing this is a key consideration.

view of health and safety in the North Sea, he concludes that it is a best practice model for the offshore industry elsewhere: “That’s not to say that everyone will adopt our regime; however, we are very much of the belief that our regulatory controls and systems are as good as they need to be, and probably as good as they can be.

“We don’t see too much scope for enhancement on the regulatory front.” ■

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