Role of Research and Information Sharing

By Doug Morris, Bureau of Safety and Environmental Enforcement, USA

In recent years, the offshore oil and gas industry has been actively involved in developing oil and gas reserves that are located in extremely challenging environments such as the arctic or deep-water. The development of these resources often requires the use of innovative and engineering solutions that are outside the scope of current industry standards and often are considered "cutting edge" technology.

These technologies are developed after the investment of significant engineering resources by operators and equipment manufacturers over a period of years.

These unique projects present challenges to the agencies that are responsible for ensuring that any risks and uncertainty inherent in new technology have been sufficiently identified and mitigated. Regulators are often heavily reliant on the documentation, information, and expertise provided by individual operators.

The International Regulators Forum (IRF), in some cases, provides assistance to regulators that need to evaluate new or unproven technology. This is accomplished in two ways. First, the IRF provides a forum for regulators to share lessons learned and best practices involving similar projects located in their jurisdiction. Second, IRF meetings give members an opportunity to share research and data on unproven and emerging technology and then utilize that information when reviewing proposed projects in the future.

For example, BSEE recently completed a research project that potentially raises questions concerning the validity of the criteria and assumptions that is currently being used in the design of subsea equipment used in high temperature and high pressure environments. Although BSEE funded this study to address specific Gulf of Mexico concerns, this report, after completion of a peer review, will provide valuable information to other IRF members that review similar proposed projects in the future.

By collaborating through the sharing information and research on offshore developments, the IRF can increase the overall knowledge of its members and help to ensure sound and consistent regulatory approaches toward addressing these complex technologies.