

Regulator: guard dog and guide dog

The Norwegian model for managing safety in the petroleum sector is based on a clear division of roles and responsibilities between the parties in industry, and on mutual trust and respect. Put simply, the safety regulator acts as both guard dog and guide dog.

The main features of the Norwegian model are outlined below.

Responsibility rests with the companies

Each company is responsible for the safety of its own operations. This is a fundamental principle in Norway's petroleum regulations, because it is the individual player who has the detailed knowledge, decision-taking authority and – not least – resources required to ensure that the regulatory requirements are fulfilled and complied with.

Government sets the parameters

The safety regulator is responsible for setting the parameters for the industry, and for following up activities to ensure they are conducted in a prudent manner. Its work includes developing the regulations, supervising the companies to see they comply with the requirements, and ensuring that its enforcement powers (such as orders) are exercised appropriately in the event of regulatory breaches.

The government is responsible for ensuring that an integrated approach is taken to regulating the industry, and that regulatory developments keep in step with general trends in the sector. The Petroleum Safety Authority Norway (PSA) is also responsible for assessing whether the standards referenced in the guidelines are good enough.

Workers must participate

Worker participation is a regulatory requirement in Norway. The principle is that the person exposed to the risk must participate in decisions related to health, safety and the environment (HSE). This is partly intended to ensure that the collective knowledge and experience of the workforce is utilised to ensure that issues have been adequately clarified before decisions are taken. Safety delegates and members of the working environment committees in the companies have a special role – and duty – in this respect.

The companies must make provision for genuine worker participation, and ensure that legally required bodies such as the working environment committee and the safety delegate service are used in a good and constructive manner.

Tripartite collaboration is a precondition

Tripartite collaboration between employers, employees and government has a long history in Norwegian industry. In the petroleum sector, this means that these parties sit down together to collaborate constructively on improvements – including to safety and the working environment. The Safety Forum and Regulatory Forum are two of the most important arenas for such cooperation in the petroleum industry.

Performance-based regulations

The provisions in Norway's HSE regulations are primarily formulated as performance-based

requirements. These specify the level of safety to be achieved, but not how to do this. That gives the companies great freedom to decide how to meet regulatory requirements.

An important advantage of performance-based as opposed to specific requirements is that technological advances do not outstrip the regulations. The alternative would be regulations which need constant revision to keep pace with new technology and solutions.

PSA as both guide and guard dog

As a guard dog, the PSA supervises that the companies operate prudently at all times, and exercises its enforcement powers if they fail to do so.

Its role as a guide dog relates to the constant dialogue maintained with the companies, where the goal is to share knowledge and experience in such a way that they contribute to strengthening safety and reducing risk in the industry. The demand for continuous improvement is the cornerstone here.

Constant contacts between the PSA and the companies are important for enforcing the regulations. The authority exercises its role as a guide dog for the industry through such dialogue.

In its guide dog role, the PSA is concerned to spread insight and understanding of the regulatory requirements and to share expertise and experience. The goal is to reduce risk and contribute to continuous improvements in safety.

As a guard dog, the PSA supervises the companies to ensure that they operate prudently at all times, and can exercise its enforcement powers (such as orders) if they fail to do so. An order is a strong legally binding instrument imposed in the event of serious nonconformities.

In acute circumstances, such as a hazard or accident which threatens safety, the PSA has the authority to take even stronger enforcement action – such as stopping an activity immediately.