

Collaboration across borders in times of crisis

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Collaboration: *Cooperative arrangement in which two or more parties (which may or may not have any previous relationship) work jointly towards a common goal* (Wikipedia)

Crisis: *any event this is going (or is expected) to lead to an unstable and dangerous situation affecting an individual, group, community or whole society.* (Wikipedia)

Rising to the COVID-19 challenge in Australia

When the catastrophic societal health risks associated with COVID-19 emerged in early 2020, the global offshore oil and gas sector was presented with a host of unforeseen challenges to worker health, operating sustainability, finances and energy supply. A crisis was in the making. Industry participants around the world pulled together to work collectively and quickly in offering solutions to shared problems resulting from COVID-19.

Established groups and communication channels proved critical in quickly stepping up to the challenges posed by COVID-19. One of these groups, the International Regulators’ Forum (IRF) already existed with the aim of driving improvements in health and safety regulation of the offshore oil and gas industry through collaboration on joint programmes and information sharing. From this foundation, the IRF membership of eleven countries¹ contributed to the rapid sharing of knowledge of COVID-19, based on their domestic industry experiences.

Australia is represented on the IRF by the National Offshore Petroleum and Environmental Management Authority (NOPSEMA) and this agency was among the IRF members that looked to facilitate information exchange across domestic and international borders to add to collective opportunities to improve. This facilitation role performed by regulators was particularly important in the initial stages of the pandemic, when the severity of potential impacts was being assessed.

In February 2020, NOPSEMA required all offshore oil and gas facility operators to review their infectious disease management plans to ensure they had arrangements in place for reducing COVID-19 related health risks to all personnel. Having such plans was normal for industry in responding to the health risks of common diseases such as measles and chicken-pox. Hence the mechanisms for dealing with the new risk of COVID-19 were already well established and could be rapidly tailored to this emerging risk.

Information sharing

NOPSEMA then surveyed all facility operators to establish what they were actually doing to manage the health of offshore workers when faced with the unknowns of COVID-19. After analysing the responses, NOPSEMA established that in most cases plans had been implemented. Some risk reduction measures used by some facility operators were seen as opportunities to be more effective if applied broadly across industry. Less than a week passed between the start of the survey and the provision of the analysis and feedback to industry in the form of exemplars, or better practices. The information was published and offered to all, with the aim of facility operators applying best practices in the context of their current arrangements.

¹ The IRF member countries include: Australia; Brazil; Canada; Denmark; Mexico; The Netherlands; New Zealand; Norway; United Kingdom; United States.

NOPSEMA then shared the exemplars with the IRF for onward sharing and to encourage further development and effective application. This exchange resulted in some of the member countries adopting the results as a guide for leading practice to share within their own jurisdictions. The IRF met virtually across the globe exchanging experiences and information, such as protocols for helicopter transfer of suspected cases. One Canadian service provider was happy to share their company's procedure on the one condition that "if you can improve it – you must let us know so we can in turn improve"!

According to NOPSEMA CEO Stuart Smith, the pandemic has highlighted the regulator's ability to "rapidly exchange information and experiences with industry and stakeholders, including its international counterparts, for shared learning and implementation to protect the workforce". Internationally, there is recognition that the pandemic has influenced global practices in positive ways.

"At NOPSEMA, we have really valued the shared experiences from other IRF jurisdictions and that's given us the opportunity to test whether or not what we're doing is amongst leading practice or not," Mr Smith said.

"We have sought to apply international learnings 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.

Engaging industry, the workforce and the regulators

Similar to the practices of some other IRF members, NOPSEMA created an industry forum involving the industry, unions and state government representatives. This forum met regularly to share information and resolve COVID-19 related priority issues to fast-track information flow.

As well as establishing a COVID-19 Taskforce to coordinate the agency response, NOPSEMA released a COVID-19 Compliance Strategy, explaining how NOPSEMA would act to support industry as it produced essential energy supplies, while maintaining oversight of industry's management of health, safety and environmental risks. Inspections followed, with operator's senior management personally called to ensure the learnings were reaching them and being applied. In all cases, these senior managers welcomed the inspection findings and the opportunities to improve their systems.

This engaging approach by NOPSEMA received endorsement and positive feedback from Australian operators and international regulatory bodies, reinforcing that NOPSEMA's actions made a difference to the health and safety outcomes of the offshore industry.

In addition to increased interaction and stronger collaboration, NOPSEMA's Head of Safety and Integrity, Derrick O'Keeffe believes the lessons learned from COVID-19 can be used to bolster industry's capabilities to deal with threats, leading to better practices and safer outcomes.

"There's nothing dramatically new about an infectious disease being a risk. It's the specific risks associated with COVID-19 and the effective responses that are valuable to our collective knowledge base. Each step in the learning process provides a contribution to improve industry. Each step provides a continual reminder that the threats are there even if we can't see them – we all must be ready for them," Mr O'Keeffe said.

The pandemic has also reinforced the important role of offshore Health and Safety Representatives (HSRs) in representing and voicing the health and safety needs of the offshore workforce, with NOPSEMA developing initiatives to improve operator and NOPSEMA engagement with, and support of, HSRs.

NOPSEMA’s inspections included virtual meetings between inspectors and facility HSRs. HSRs described how operators had implemented COVID-19 management systems, procedures and provided guidance, and the quality and frequency of communication between the operator and the workforce. Inspectors assessed the effectiveness of these measures and identified areas requiring improvement. HSRs were provided with immediate feedback, both the positive findings as well as the improvements required so they could follow up with facility management. Where significant deficiencies were identified, NOPSEMA held follow-up meetings with HSRs to verify that the improvements described by the operator had been implemented and were having the desired effect.

Preparing for the next challenges

Instead of being constrained by the way things have always been done, COVID-19 has demonstrated that different approaches to solving problems can be successful, including stronger collaboration between all industry stakeholders and unconstrained by domestic and international borders. This article identified the key role that regulators can have in this process. No doubt industry will continue to face emerging risks of all types, and the experience being gained through the COVID-19 pandemic can provide continued guidance to ensure those risks are quickly and effectively managed.

“COVID-19 has reminded regulators and industry to expect the unexpected. We all have to be alert to changes in risk, and the emergence of new risks. This thinking will allow us to quickly adapt new processes to the existing, established systems that have been created to date. Collaboration across domestic and international borders has proven its value, through organisations such as the IRF. Rapid knowledge sharing has been the cornerstone of this collaboration” Mr O’Keeffe said.



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