

A most active month...

On the UKCS twenty mobile rigs are involved in drilling operations on 23 wells; 7 exploration, 5 appraisals and 11 development/production wells - the latter including batch drilling programmes.

The 12 rigs employed in drilling E&A wells are 7 semisubmersibles, 4 jackups and the Stena Carron drillship. The 8 units on development/production drilling operations are 3 semisubs and 5 jackups.

With the easing of weather conditions November has seen the highest level of well starts all year, with 6 spuds and one sidetrack, bringing the year's total so far up to 45 E&A starts; 30 spuds and 15 sidetracks.

Of the 11 development and production drilling programmes, just three are utilising platform-based facilities emphasising the shift to mobile units. To date 63 wells have spudded and 46 sidetracks have commenced in 2011 and drilling levels are only marginally behind those of the same period in 2010.

In the West of Shetland area, one mobile unit is operating. The Stena Carron drillship spudded Chevron's Well 213/28-1 on the Aberlour Prospect in early November in 3,600ft of water following suspension of the Cambo appraisal, Well 204/10a-4Z. Possibly untested due to adverse weather conditions, the Well may be re-entered next year. Awilco's WilPhoenix suspended Hurricane's Whirlwind re-entry following a DST programme ahead of a move to the Central North Sea. Severe weather also hampered Hurricane's operation and the results of the test programme, flowing only low rates to surface, remain ambiguous as to whether the accumulation is volatile oil or gas condensate.

In the Northern North Sea two semisubmersibles are active; the Sedco 714 on Total's 3/14a-19Z Ardbeg sidetrack, which kicked off on 12 November and Awilco's WilHunter, which was finally able to spud MPX's Well 3/3b-13 in appraisal of the Middle Jurassic Orlando Discovery.

The number of wells active in the Central North Sea has jumped from five to eight with the spud of EnCore's 14/30a-5 Tudor Rose Tertiary heavy oil appraisal (Sedco 704 semisub), EnQuest's 21/13a-5 Crathes/Moon appraisal (Transocean's John Shaw semisub) already having encountered light oil in its shallow Palaeocene target, Antrim's 21/29d-11 on the Eocene Erne Prospect with the semisub WilPhoenix and Nexen's 39/1b-3 targeting the Jurassic Edware Prospect. Nexen abandoned its second sidetrack on Polecat South appraisal, Well 20/4a-10, ahead of the semisub Transocean Prospect's move to Block 39/1b.

Also in the CNS operations are ongoing with the semisub Ocean Nomad on BG's 22/15-4 (Esperanza) where a Palaeocene light oil discovery has been made, and three heavy-duty jack-ups continue operations in the HPHT province: BG's sidetracked Jackdaw appraisal, Well 30/2a-8Z (Gorilla VI) nearly 500 days since the initial spud of Well 30/2a-8 in August 2010, Maersk's Culzean appraisal Well 22/25a-11 (Ensko 101) and GDF SUEZ' Faraday Prospect Well 30/1a-11 (Galaxy II).

In the Southern North Sea one well is currently drilling; Wintershall's Wingate Field appraisal, Well 44/24b-A2 with the jack-up Ensco 80. The jack-up Energy Enhancer was still on station towards month end at the location of Well 53/2a-14Z, abandoned in early November, where Perenco reportedly had success with its Leman South appraisal.

To the west of Britain, in the East Irish Sea Basin, no wells are drilling although the HW well forecast might suggest the region is ripe for a multi-well/multi-operator drilling programme in 2012, similar to that conducted by the jackup Ensco 92 between May 2009 and March 2010.

As weather conditions again decline into December, companies in the sector will be a little relieved that a sufficient window occurred during November allowing a scramble of rig moves that resulted in six new spuds and a sidetrack, a monthly level of starts not seen since August 2010. In one fell swoop, the activity level has been dragged out of the doldrums and comparisons with the early 1970s are behind us. Current well spud numbers are broadly on a par with those of 1999 – still bad, but could have been worse. Success rates might even rise given the positive noises coming from a number of drilling operations.