

Weather plagues 2012 campaign, but results keep coming

A long awaited weather window during November resulted in the highest level of well starts on the UKCS throughout 2011. The momentum didn't last and December saw just two E&A starts, both of those sidetracking from rigs already on station. The year's tally closed at 46 E&A starts; 30 spuds and 16 sidetracks, with the number of spuds evenly split between exploration and appraisal wells. 13 of the 16 sidetracks, predominantly geological in nature, were from appraisal wells and 3 exploratory. Additionally 2 wells were re-spudded and 2 re-entered.

Combined E&A spuds were on a par with 1999 (the previous low in 1978 seeing just 28 spuds). Exploration spuds in 2011 represented the lowest level since 2002 and the number of appraisal spuds was the lowest level since 2003.

124 development/production wells started in 2011 comprising 68 initial wells and 56 sidetracks. 3 wells were re-entered. This activity set was broadly in line with that of 2010, although a relatively small number of fields accounted for much of the drilling and Apache's Forties Field stands out as the "most drilled field" of 2011. 20 development/production drilling programmes are currently ongoing, covering 17 fields and utilising a mix of platform-based facilities and mobile rigs.

Eight mobile units - 3 semisubmersibles, 4 jack-ups and a drillship - are active on E&A wells on the UKCS; 2 on exploration and 6 on appraisal wells, two of which commenced in December. Poor weather conditions mean that the 2012 E&A drilling season is yet to ramp up - just two starts are noted in 2012 (both appraisals) and a number of units remain on standby waiting on weather to move.

In the West of Shetland area just one mobile unit - the Stena Carron drillship - is active, on Chevron's Well 213/28-1 on the Aberlour Prospect.

In the Northern North Sea two semisubmersibles remain on location; the Sedco 714 on Total's 3/14a-19Z Ardbeg sidetrack and Awilco's WilHunter on MPX's Well 3/3b-13 appraising the Orlando Discovery and yet again delayed by technical issues and poor weather conditions.

Four wells are active in the Central North Sea although, when conditions allow, that number should rise. Operations continue on BG's long-running and sidetracked Jackdaw appraisal, Well 30/2a-8Z (JU Rowan Gorilla 6) and on Maersk's Culzean appraisal Well 22/25a-11 (JU Ensco 101), although both should be nearing completion. In that same HPHT province, GDF SUEZ commenced one of the two January starts: Well 30/13b-10 (JU Galaxy 2) appraising the Upper Jurassic Jacqui Field, while Premier initiated Well 21/28a-11 (semisub Sedco 704) appraising the eastern extent of the Eocene Fyne Field.

During December operations were completed on EnCore's 14/30a-5 Tudor Rose appraisal (P&A Oil), EnQuest's 21/13a-5 Crathes/Moon appraisal (P&A Oil), Antrim's 21/29d-11Z (Suspended oil) on the Eocene Erne Prospect, Nexen's 39/1b-3 (not thought a success) on the Jurassic Edgware Prospect, BG's 22/15-4 (P&A Oil) on the Palaeocene Esperanza Prospect and GDF SUEZ' Faraday Prospect Well 30/1a-11 – confirmed as a gas/condensate discovery in the deep HPHT objective.

In the Southern North Sea one well is currently drilling; Wintershall's Wingate Field appraisal, Well 44/24b-A2Z with the jack-up Ensco 80. The pilot hole (A2) is thought to have been successful and was P&A during December ahead of the current sidetrack commencing. Wingate came on stream in mid-October 2011.

Current indications suggest 2012 levels will outstrip 2011. The rig market has tightened though and operators looking to translate further plans into action may find drilling units hard obtain.

Despite the depressed activity levels in 2011, our upcoming analysis will show that, at least on a technical level, discoveries continued to be recorded during the year and success rates may even show a hike.

The second phase of 26th Round awards (late December 2011), it is noted, has added 5 firm wells and 2 contingent wells to our forecast well pool, currently hovering above the 200 mark