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# Unique Emergency Response Collaboration in the Norwegian Oil and Gas Industry

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*Although the oil companies operating on the Norwegian continental shelf are competitors in most contexts, many of them have chosen to work together on emergency response. Since its foundation in 2009, the Operators' Association for Emergency Response, a unique and professionalized emergency response hub, has supported more than a hundred different operations in the North Sea, the Norwegian Sea, and the Barents Sea.*



The phone call between the second-line emergency response manager and the control room on the platform is short and concise. There has been an incident, and the offshore organization has mobilized its emergency response organization. This calls for immediate actions both offshore and onshore.



THE EMERGENCY RESPONSE LEADER makes a quick assessment of the risk potential and calls their chief of staff. Together they agree on the resources that must be mobilized. Then the chief of staff mobilizes the four second-line coordinators on duty. The order is determined by the nature of the incident. If personnel must be evacuated from the platform quickly, the logistics coordinator is called first. This person's job is to contact the operating company's logistics department, the helicopter company, and the nearest field centre to request assistance from the oil industry's search and rescue helicopters. After that, the HR coordinator is called on to mobilize the telephone lines for families, and the operating company's centre for evacuated staff and families. The HR coordinator must also establish contact with the responsible specialist doctor and duty doctor.

Up to ten call handlers will be ready within two hours to staff the phone lines and answer the questions of families. The hotel will prepare rooms and common areas for the evacuated and their families within three hours. If there has been an oil spill, the authorities' coordinator will be informed first, so that the oil spill emergency response resources of Norwegian Clean Seas Association for Operating Companies (NOFO) can be mobilized. Then contact with the police, the Petroleum Safety Authority, and the Coastal Administration is established.

The last call goes to the information coordinator, who ensures that the facts regarding the incident and the emergency response operation are forwarded to the operating company's third-line crisis communication team, which is at the strategic level. This team puts together approved messages that are communicated to all interested parties, including families, staff, collaborators, contractors, partners, authorities, and the media.

While the chief of staff mobilizes the second-line team, the second-line emergency response manager calls the Joint Rescue Coordination Centre to check whether the first-line team has requested resources, as well as to learn the estimated arrival time of the search and rescue helicopters and which additional resources may be required.

This exchange also confirms that the emergency response manager and the Joint Rescue Coordination Centre have the same understanding of the situation. The second-line emergency response manager then calls the third-line emergency response manager, at the strategic level, before entering the incident into the digital crisis management tool "CIM".

*All this needs to be accomplished within 15 minutes.*

## Worst Case

The second-line team sets into motion the immediate response as soon as it is alerted, then musters at the emergency response room at Forus, in Sandnes, Norway, within an hour. It usually happens faster.

When the team is present and all immediate actions have been taken, the emergency response manager rings a bell. The first meeting has begun. The proactive staff methodology used at the operational, strategic, and tactical levels means that the emergency response manager always assumes the worst case and a moderate overreaction as the basis for risk potential and resource requirements. In the beginning, there is often little information, combined with many potential solutions. As more time elapses and more information becomes available, the number of courses of actions to handle the worst case dwindles. This is why it is

important to mobilize too much and too many, rather than having to realize at a later point that the incident was underestimated. Regular status meetings are held to update the team on new information and ensure a common understanding of the situation, set new focus points, determine new actions, and possibly adjust the plan. Everyone knows what they are supposed to do.

After having handled real incidents and carrying out more than 100 exercises per year for the past 11 years, the necessary measures for the different hazards and accidents have been fine-tuned. Nevertheless, every incident presents its own unique challenges.

## Special Responsibilities of the Oil and Gas Sector

In Norway, it is the state-run Joint Rescue Coordination Centre that directs and coordinates all rescue operations, whether on land, at sea, or in the air. It also has a responsibility to be proactive in maintaining and developing the cooperation among rescue services. The Petroleum Act and the health, environment, and safety regulations state that the operating companies in the oil and gas sector have an independent duty to direct and coordinate the use of emergency response assets in handling hazards and accidents until the public authorities potentially assume responsibility for coordination.

Search and rescue missions outside the safety zone around platforms and mobile facilities, which is usually at a 500-metre radius, are generally the public authorities' responsibility, but the operating company and the Joint Rescue Coordination Centre may agree on something else where appropriate. The operator still has a general duty to contribute in situations involving hazards and accidents outside the safety zone.



## New and Smaller Oil Companies Required New Solutions

Until the turn of the millennium, activities on the Norwegian continental shelf were dominated by a few large oil companies with substantial experience and resources. Low oil prices and low exploration activity led to a decreased willingness to invest in the sector, forcing the authorities to take measures to provide incentives and ensure that projects of importance to the national economy are carried out. The measures included an agreement on the prequalification of new oil and gas companies; an allocation agreement for licenses in mature fields and the introduction of the so-called Exploration Reimbursement Agreement of 2005. Before that, only oil companies with high turnovers could deduct 78 per cent of their exploration drilling costs from their taxes. The authorities' measures coincided with a steadily rising oil price and a new optimism.

As a result, new oil companies flocked to the Norwegian continental shelf. According to the Norwegian Petroleum Directorate, the number of operators peaked in 2013. There were as many as 56 different active parties on Norway's shelf. At the turn of 2020/2021, that number had sunk to 37, of which 24 had the status of an operating company.

## A Common Emergency Response Organization

The emergency response requirements stipulated in the Petroleum Act and Norway's health, environment and safety regulations have not changed during this time, however.



Ole Jacob Haug,  
photo by OFFB

They do not distinguish between large and small operating companies. All of them have to be capable of taking emergency response measures in situations involving hazards and accidents, and of coordinating the use of emergency response assets — including on-site and external assets. However, for a number of the new small and mid-sized entities, it did not seem feasible to establish large, cost-intensive emergency response organizations in order to carry out a few short exploration well operations.

In 2008, 27 oil companies, therefore, joined forces to find an answer to the question, "Is it possible to establish a reliable, professional second-line emergency response centre for the shared use of actors on the Norwegian continental shelf?"

"The answer was yes," says Ole Jacob Haug, Managing Director of Operators' Association for Emergency Response (OFFB—Operatørene forening for beredskap) since its inception in 2009. His previous position was that of Chief Operations and Exercise J6, Norwegian Joint Headquarters.

The task was to form a user-led, non-commercial emergency response organization at the operational level that would deliver high-quality services to the member companies and constitute an integrated part of their emergency response systems.

## Few Incidents on the Norwegian Shelf

The advantages of forming a mutual emergency response organization are numerous. Since emergency response is organized in an association, the aim is not to generate profit for the owners. The aim is to get the best preparedness and emergency response management that can be achieved with the means the organization has at its disposal.

Another factor is that there are relatively few emergency incidents in the Norwegian offshore industry. The focus is on properly managing the lessons learned from incidents and sharing experience with other members and the industry at large so that all parties can benefit from the existing expertise. The same goes for experience from exercises. The focus is always on finding areas of improvement, rather than on identifying culprits. This creates a foundation for continuous improvement. By standardizing processes, OFFB also ensures a mutual way of

operating that is familiar to the collaborators. At the same time, the emergency response organization stays active even if the individual operators do not carry out operations continually.

## A Staff of 13, and a Large Organization

Since its foundation in 2009, OFFB has been on emergency response duty for more than 100 exploration operations as well as a series of production platforms, drilling operations, subsea facilities, gas pipes on the ocean floor and processing facilities on land.

Despite fluctuations, both in the level of activity within the industry and the organization's membership, OFFB's level of activity has risen steadily. Today, OFFB consists of a small core of 13 full-time employees, mainly in the positions of emergency response managers, chiefs of staff and supporting functions.

"We have a good mixture of personnel from the military, police, fire departments, the media and academia, with a wide array of competencies such as navigator, helicopter pilot, operations manager, nurse and journalist. Several of our staff members have a background in the Norwegian military and NATO," says Haug.

In addition to the full-time staff, 20 coordinators are on fixed rotational duty. The same goes for the managers of the phone answering service for families, the managers of the operators' centres for evacuated personnel and families along the Norwegian coast and their support teams, duty doctors and a large crisis communication team that can be mobilized at the strategic level. When the alarm sounds, the emergency response organization is scaled up to 150 personnel, each of whom has been trained to carry out their role. Personnel with a NATO background will be familiar with the way OFFB operates in several areas. Emergency response is organized at the same levels, for instance, with OFFB itself taking the role of the operational level. The planning processes and organization of operational areas also bear a clear resemblance, as do the principles underlying the planning of large exercises.

## Collaboration in Practice

A large part of OFFB's day-to-day activity consists of training and exercises. In fact, the organization carries out more than 100 activi-





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Photo by Jan Inge Haga, OFFB

ties every year, from basic skill training to large collaborative exercises. Usually, an exercise has a duration of up to four hours, but there are also large exercises where many hundred individuals role-play in real time. The Norwegian authorities have established four basic principles for emergency response.

The principle of **responsibility** says that the organization with responsibility for an area in daily business also has that responsibility during emergencies.

The principle of **similarity** means that the organization carrying out an emergency response should be as similar as possible to the organization that conducts daily business.

The principle of **proximity** dictates that a crisis is to be handled at the lowest possible organizational level.

The principle of **collaboration**, which was formalized as a consequence of the terrorist attack in Oslo, and on the island of Utøya on 22 July 2011, says that authorities, private enterprises and government agencies have an independent responsibility to ensure the best possible collaboration with relevant actors and agencies with regard to prevention, emergency response, and crisis management.

For OFFB, this collaboration is also essential. Exercises enable the operating compa-

nies to put their planning process to the test, identify points of improvement, clarify expectations and calibrate the collaboration so that lives, health, environment and material assets are protected in the best possible way when undesirable events do occur.

This is why OFFB invites a wide array of participants when exercises are carried out and maintains close contact with actors such as the police, the Petroleum Safety Authority, the Joint Rescue Coordination Centre, rig companies, contractors, private and public entities in oil spill preparedness, municipal emergency response resources, and private and public health actors. Many collaboration partners make use of this opportunity, and it is clearly a win-win situation as evidenced by their seamless cooperation in crises. This also became apparent in April 2019 when OFFB and the oil company Wintershall were able to participate in the Norwegian Armed Forces' annual counterterrorism exercise ARIES together with, among others, the Norwegian Police Security Service, Norway's Southwestern Police District and the Petroleum Safety Authority.

It is not every day one sees soldiers of the Norwegian Special Operations Commando board the Brage platform in the North Sea from the air and sea to respond to a terrorist attack.

## Experience Exchange with Other Industries

In addition to inviting collaboration partners to participate in exercises, OFFB places an emphasis on sharing expertise and experience with organizations and personnel from other industries and parts of society than one might normally expect in this context.

One example is the collaboration with Stavanger Prison, where OFFB's expertise, experience, and work methodology has afforded the Norwegian Correctional Service a unique opportunity to strengthen its emergency response and risk management within the prison. According to the manager of Stavanger Prison, Tanja Rosså Ødegård, the initiative has allowed the prison to improve, develop and streamline processes. It has also been hailed as a success by members of the Norwegian Parliament's Standing Committee on Justice.

"This kind of experience exchange allows us to increase our expertise and our ability to manage crisis situations, while also ensuring that the organizations around us undergo training together with us. The more actors know how we work, the easier it becomes to work together effectively when an incident occurs," says Haug. †