

COPEX 2006

The oil pipeline community met in Brussels

The CONCAWE Oil Pipelines Operators Experience Exchange seminar (COPEX for short) that took place in Brussels on 30–31 March was continuing a long-established tradition. CONCAWE has been active in the field of oil pipelines since the early 70s and started organising regular seminars for pipeline operators during the 80s. The seminar has been run on a regular 4-yearly schedule since 1994. The principal aim of COPEX is to provide a forum for pipeline operators to update their knowledge of legislative, regulatory and technical developments in the field as well as exchange information in an informal environment and without commercial pressures. Although regulators and selected equipment suppliers are invited to give presentations, contributions are essentially provided by pipeline operators who also form the bulk of the audience. COPEX 2006 was attended by 115 delegates from 15 countries, together representing virtually all major oil pipelines in Europe.

The Seminar first considered the legislative and regulatory developments in the field of pipelines. In 2004 the EU Commission convened a group of experts to consider safety in all modes of transport. Sub-groups were formed for each mode including one on pipelines in which CONCAWE participated. A presentation outlined the content of the report of the sub-group to be published later this year, which points to third-party interference as the main hazard facing pipelines. Within the framework of the Conventions on the Transboundary Effects of Industrial Accidents and on the Protection and Use of Transboundary Waters and International Lakes, the UNECE began drafting, in 2005, safety guidelines covering design, operation and maintenance of pipelines. The content of the nearly final document, to which CONCAWE provided significant input, was highlighted. The Guidelines are due to be released later this year. A further presentation described the regulatory framework in place in one of Germany's States. The CONCAWE spillage statistics provided the material for an overview of the integrity performance of EU oil pipelines in the past

four years and the circumstances of a number of recent incidents were explained in short presentations.

Pipeline integrity management systems provided the theme of the second session of the Seminar. These systems, based on the general principle of quality management, are today the backbone of pipeline operation. They are designed to ensure reliability, accountability, traceability and transparency in all aspects of the operation of pipeline systems, also providing the framework for a pathway towards performance improvement. Several presentations described the state of the art in terms of inspection systems (intelligence pigs) and leak detection, while the problems related to illegal tappings were also discussed. This was followed by a panel discussion on pipeline ageing, debating whether this issue should be considered as a problem and if so what should be done about it. The current EU pipeline inventory is about 40 years old on average, with a maximum of just over 60 years. The general opinion was that we are still far from having reached an age that would require large scale replacement. The situation is manageable with the appropriate state-of-the-art maintenance and inspection techniques.

The third session of the Seminar covered general operational matters including cost benchmarking and cost reduction programmes, capacity improvement with flow improvers and ultrasonic metering.

The Seminar was concluded by a panel session devoted to the all important issue of third party interference and, in particular, how this major threat to pipelines can be better tackled by both the industry and the authorities. Although no definite answer emerged from the debate it proved once again that this is the most serious issue in the field of pipeline safety. CONCAWE/OPMG intends to initiate an activity on this subject in the near future in order to fuel the reflection and make concrete proposals.