

HYDRO INTERNATIONAL INTERVIEWS KLAAS WESTER OF FUGRO

Renewables Offer our Biggest Opportunity



The biggest challenge for hydrography lies in surveying the Arctic seas, and the biggest opportunity for the industry lies in renewables like offshore wind energy and gas hydrates. Klaas Wester, CEO at Fugro, is optimistic about the future; the economic crisis has been gentle on the Dutch company and his words are further borne out by the order portfolio for 2011. Wester talked to Hydro International about the chances, threats and strategies out there in the surveying and geotechnical business, concluding with the message that the industry will continue to thrive, thus offering a wide open and appealing field of career choice for young people.

How has the economic crisis been affecting Fugro in particular and the hydrographic surveying business in general?

The impact on Fugro divisions working in the seismic industry has been by far the greatest; a lot of seismic work is closely related to oil & gas and construction, sectors which have of course suffered. The more government-related activities, among others hydrographic surveying, have seen way less impact from the downturn. Overall I think we can say that Fugro hasn't been too badly affected.

Can you say anything about geographical areas of growth?

Oil & gas, infrastructure and transport are important business sectors for Fugro. In the Far East drilling and exploration is increasingly important. Whereas in the United States recovery is still slow, despite stimulus funding, and the state of the European economy remains fragile, Australia, China and Vietnam are booming markets, and there's plenty of activity in West Africa, particularly Angola. Also living up to its promise is Brazil, where Petrobras is doing a great deal of deep-water exploration.

Are there still lessons to be learnt from the recent crisis?

A few a priori basic rules need to be observed: financial, geographical and overall flexibility, together with investment in client relations. In times of uncertainty one sees trust and history as determining factors in terms of securing the job.

What do you consider the most important technical trends?

Lidar in particular and aerial surveying using other imaging techniques in general; these are certainly trends that will grow in importance. In terms of deep-water survey, I see a big future for AUVs. Another accelerating trend is towards deep water seabed installations, making the metrology around these projects immensely significant. The need to fit pipes at a depth of 1,500 metres with accuracy of less than 1cm emphasises the growing importance of acoustic positioning and inertial navigation. The consequence of all this is that projects will become more complex and the risks larger.

You have already said offshore wind farms will represent a major opportunity for Fugro over coming years. How do you see this specific new development?

At the moment north-western Europe is the place where offshore wind farms are becoming most common because on-land capacity here is increasingly scarce, not least due to the not-in-my-backyard syndrome. In addition, much more leverage is possible with offshore wind farms, at least when linked to each other. We are currently in a phase of project execution. So after years of planning and preparation, it's really taking off. We were involved in the initial phases, but actual building now means Fugro has a great deal of work, and of course we hope to be involved in the whole cycle of inspection, repair and maintenance. Other regions, for instance Florida and New England in the US, are following suit, so that will be big. In this respect we are only at the beginning!

Are there other oil & gas industry counterparts that you expect to offer a major source of work?

A good example of a promising field that might possibly prove very significant is the exploration of gas hydrates. Some scientists estimate the total volume of gas hydrates on the seabed must be around the same as that of natural gas under the earth or seabed. Countries poor in natural oil and gas reserves are eager to find ways to explore deep-sea gas hydrates, but this research is still in its infancy. We do however consider it important to maintain a presence in that research.

Do you see any challenges for hydrographic surveying in the near future?

Activities in the Arctic are becoming increasingly important, but also pose the greatest challenge to us. Conditions there are extreme; instruments need to be able to stand up to exposure in the harshest environment anywhere in the world. We have been involved in Arctic operations both in the Northern polar region and in Antarctica. Expeditions are extremely costly, and yet everybody wants to be there for

geopolitical reasons, to plant a flag. It almost seems there is no time to lose.

Fewer and fewer young people are choosing a career in our industry, with universities suffering from lack of incoming students and vacancies difficult to fill. What is the main cause for this?

That's a difficult question to answer. We think it important to continue promoting and supporting initiatives in co-operation with universities. But young professionals are not as attracted as they used to be to life at sea, mainly because on board ship it is less comfortable than onshore. We are trying to change that; it's another thing we're investing heavily in. Ships are equipped with saunas, cinemas and fitness rooms to make life on board as comfortable as possible; even an internet café is a must nowadays! But nevertheless people will be away from home for weeks or months on end, and that's something they just don't like anymore.

Is this lack of new blood viable for the profession in the long run?

Shortage of personnel means that we are working harder to make techniques less labour intensive: in this sense the lack of inflow is speeding technical developments. And to be honest, as a global company our answer will be simply to approach local markets where there is still a big appetite for a job with Fugro. Many of our divisions in Brazil, West Africa and the Far East are recruiting a lot of professionals from those countries.

What is your message to the business?

The attractiveness of research at sea is as old as history itself, and the role of hydrographer has always been greatly revered. The industry is important, the technology is great, and the role of hydrography will remain as significant as research and exploration of the oceans. Our public profile is key to showing the outside world what amazing fields hydrographic survey, seismic or geotechnical research and oceanography are to work in.

<https://www.hydro-international.com/content/article/renewables-offer-our-biggest-opportunity>
