

Drilling rig exits as gas field all go

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TARANAKI'S \$1 billion Pohokura gas project is complete — leaving a field now producing more gas than all the rest of New Zealand's fields combined.

Yesterday, the big Ensco-56 jack-up drilling rig was towed out of Taranaki waters, completing a two-year Pohokura assignment in which it installed a production platform 15km off the Motunui coast and drilled five production wells.

The rig is being towed to Golden Bay, where it will undergo maintenance and repairs before being towed north again to offshore of Waikawau.

There, it will drill a wildcat exploration well for a new client, Discovery Geo Corporation.

The rig's departure means the Pohokura field is fully operational and at the start of a production period likely to last at least 20 years.

"Pohokura is a very good gasfield that is performing at least as well as expected," said Rob Jager, general manager of field operating company, Shell Todd Oil Services.

"It's a state-of-the-art, flagship development that is now providing the major portion of New Zealand gas. It's also been very significant for Taranaki. At the height of the construction phase there were more than 1000 workers involved in the Pohokura project, which was very good for the local economy."

The flow of gas from Pohokura is a company secret, but Mr Jager confirmed it was at least half the output of the giant Maui field in its heyday. And that is with only a limited number of the field's eight production wells flowing at any one time.

"Pohokura's production capability is greater than the onshore production plant's capacity.

"While all the wells are different in that they all produce different volumes of gas, normally we run three of them."

Pohokura was discovered in 2000 and development planning began in 2002. The final investment decision was made in 2004, work began in 2005 and "first gas" from Pohokura's three onshore production wells was delivered in September 2006.

The Ensco-56 arrived in March 2006 to drill the offshore wells and install the offshore production platform and, although problems were encountered preparing foundations for the platform's legs, the entire development project ran smoothly, said Mr Jager.

"To make the final investment decision in 2004 and deliver the first gas in 2006 is very quick in terms of gasfield development."

Now the Ensco rig had departed, a 500-metre exclusion zone would remain in place around the production platform, he said.



The Ensco rig is towed south from the production platform at the Pohokura field after completing its two-year assignment.

Photo: MIKE SCOTT