



Guest editorial

American reality TV show doesn't come close to portraying the reality of industry's rigs

IF YOU HAVE not seen the TV series "Black Gold" (broadcast on the TruTV channel on American television), you may have heard about it. Based on online reviews and trailers, the show appears to have attracted quite a following: Variety: "It's undeniably entertaining." Dallas Morning News: "... You've got a show that's at once an amalgam of every good-ol'-boy cliché and utterly authentic."



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To the average person unfamiliar with a well-run drilling operation, the show is captivating and interesting. However, it is also wrong on so many levels. In the view of the American Association of Drilling Engineers (AADE), this show is a disgrace to our industry. "Black Gold" does not represent the efficient, safe and environmentally responsible drilling

operations conducted by the majority of oil and gas operators and drilling contractors, but rather panders to the stereotypes of our industry that have been invalid for decades.

First, the basic premise of the show is incorrect: Three adjacent rigs competing against one another to reach the same reservoir first. This is nothing more than false drama. Competition for leases is conducted during the planning and lease-purchasing phase of exploration and development, not actual well operations. This confirms the view many of us hold about a portion of the media – any premise is justified to develop a sense of urgency and interest to maintain the viewer.

However, what is more disturbing is the program's utter disregard for health, safety and the environment (HSE) exhibited on so many levels. If left unchallenged, this disregard for HSE becomes the dominant view the public holds of how we, the oil and gas industry, run our operations.

On the environmental side, images of mud spills resulting from careless and improper operating practices give the impression that all drilling operations inflict a high level of environmental damage. For dramatic effect, the crews on the show do not use a mud saver valve on the kelly, nor do they even use a mud bucket to divert the mud back to the circulating system. I started my drilling career

in 1981 as a mud engineer in the over-thrust belt of western Wyoming. Even then, the mud saver valve and mud bucket were standard equipment on all rigs for safety and to prevent the loss of expensive mud. For this TV show to continuously show no mud management while tripping and the failure to use technology that is over 30 years old, suggest the producers are paying the crews to intentionally engage in unsafe acts for dramatic effect. This, unfortunately, reinforces common stereotypes about the dangers and dirty nature of drilling.

The show also comes up way short on safety and health. Safety meetings and the use of basic job safety analysis (JSAs) are non-existent. The crews routinely neglect to use proper personal protective equipment (PPE). In most scenes, the crews wear only hard hats, no safety glasses, no gloves and no hearing protection. The rig equipment is pre-1980s, without even basic automation.

The show portrays an over-emphasis on getting the job done quickly, with no emphasis on body placement and only generic references to working safe. Repeated viewings of such a disregard for the use of PPE, coupled with little to no safety culture on these rigs, make a knowledgeable viewer question whether operators and contractors such as those depicted on "Black Gold" even have a viable HSE department. Does their management even understand the basics of safety management or safety systems? If this is a "true" reality show and the program is an honest portrayal of these contractors' operations, the answer is no.

Actions displayed on the show would bring immediate dismissal from any reputable operator or drilling contractor. For example, new crew members are allowed to work alone with no supervision while hoisting pipe to the rig floor. If any JSAs were completed prior to operations, it is not evident in the actions of the crews and, more disturbingly, not evident in the actions of rig site management. Many activities seem staged for the camera to reinforce old stereotypes rather than to provide an accurate representation of the working environment on the majority of drilling operations onshore or offshore.

The show's announcer repeatedly reminds the viewer that when the rig is behind schedule, safety takes a backseat. This is entirely counter to the



“Stop the Job,” “Goal Zero” and “One Accident is Too Many” culture that is endorsed and utilized by the majority of operators and contractors.

Among reputable operators and contractors, HSE culture is based on the belief that accident-free operations are not only possible but expected. Statistics from IADC and OSHA show a consistently improving accident rate in rig operations. In safety, the E&P business is actually one of the safer industries, with an overall total recordable incidence rate (TRIR) of 2.0 (OSHA 2006). TRIR is meant to reflect how many incidents occur in a work force of approximately 100 people over a full year.

For rig operations specifically, the TRIR is 5.1 onshore and 1.4 offshore and averages 2.1 worldwide (IADC, 2007 YTD). This compares with 5.1 for construction and 6.0 for manufacturing. To really put safety in perspective, the average 2.1 TRIR for rig operations is lower than the 3.3 TRIR for real estate!

IADC records show there are rigs onshore and offshore that go years without a recordable accident. In our industry, we have rigs that have never had a lost-time accident. Accident-free operations are not only possible, they should be the expectation. The mindset displayed on “Black Gold” that “people will get hurt,” “accidents will happen,” and “you have to be crazy to do what we do” is unacceptable and inaccurate.

It is the position of AADE that operator and drilling contractor management is responsible for providing a strong HSE culture for crews to work safely. We recognize that some elements of “Black Gold” do portray the oilfield spirit, and it is not our intention to belittle those individuals not fortunate enough to work on an operation managed by the majority of reputable operators and contractors. It is our opinion that these employees are entitled to work in a supportive HSE culture where accident-free operations are encouraged, supported and expected. The bottom line is, there are risks asso-

ciated with our operations; however, that does not mean accidents will happen. We can perform our work accident-free.

Sadly, the operational environment depicted in “Black Gold” does exist in pockets of our industry. Fortunately, such an environment does not exist among the drilling contractors and operators that make up the majority of our industry. Many companies refuse to do business with contractors that operate with the disregard for HSE seen on “Black Gold.” It is the view of AADE that more industry leaders need to speak out and reinforce the opinion that operations such as those depicted on “Black Gold” are unacceptable and should be stopped. The program is a disgrace to the industry; it is more of a “Black Eye” than “Black Gold.”

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