

Vista Projects prospers by using new technologies

by Ellsworth Dickson

Richard Campbell, Managing Principal of Calgary, Alberta-based Vista Projects remains optimistic in spite of the global economic downturn. For the last eight years, Vista, which provides engineering, procurement and project management services to the petroleum industry, has focused on heavy oil projects. However, being based in western Canada for the past 23 years, it has been also involved in conventional oil and gas projects as well as pipelines. Starting with only three people in 1985, Vista currently operates out of 40,000 square feet of office space that houses nearly 200 employees.

“We have been involved in using new technologies,” says Campbell. “Back in the 1980s and 1990s, we participated in many heavy oil studies. So, when this sector exploded earlier this decade, we had the expertise and background to understand how to implement these new developments. Our real skill right now is dealing with the new heavy oil technologies, which have made us a leader in steam assisted gravity drainage [SAGD].”

Vista has been involved in many of the major and successful SAGD projects and is now getting into other projects that utilize innovative new technologies. “SAGD took much of the labour and capital costs out of the old open pit oil sands operations,” says Campbell. “Today capital and operating costs using new technologies are significantly less than the SAGD method, with some, reducing operational costs by about 60%.”

On the environmental side, Campbell notes there is also the benefit of using less energy and water with new technologies, which can see a reduction from the current three barrels of water per barrel of oil to 0.1, as well as using brackish water rather

than fresh water wherever possible.

“We have been lucky during this economic downturn in that being involved with these newer technologies has resulted in much lower break-even costs compared to traditional huge open pit oil sands production,” says Campbell. “To date, things are working out for us because most of our clients tend to be low-cost producers and stay with us because of our technical knowledge and the value we offer.”

Looking forward, Campbell says there is currently a downward trend for the industry as a whole, which is why companies are seeking new ways to make oil sands production as inexpensive and as efficient as conventional oil production.

“We are trying to look between five and 20 years ahead where we are of the view that the world will need more energy and it’s clear to us that the easiest access to oil is here in Alberta. While we are cautious at the moment, we believe the future will bring renewed activity in western Canada, although there probably won’t be any more \$20 billion oil sands super projects as newer technologies are adopted,” says Campbell.

Vista aligns its project teams with its

clients and works on projects that need its skills that deal with the new oil sands technologies. “The giant projects that utilize a great many workers, plus high oil prices, are getting canceled. It’s the companies that are using the new novel technologies that result in lower costs that are prospering – and that’s where we want to be.”

While Vista is based in Calgary, it is getting attention from the Middle East and is considering opening an office in that region. Campbell says that much of the available oil reserves to be developed in the Middle East, in the future, involve accessing heavier grades of crude. “If you look at Kuwait, for example, to expand they are looking at developing their heavy oil reserves. I think there will be good opportunities for Canadian companies – engineers, fabricators and owners – to bring our heavy oil technology to projects around the world.”

Campbell says Vista’s long-term business strategy is to be the company of choice for solving engineering problems. “By 2012, we want to be western Canada’s premier technical engineering firm and by 2025, we want to be a global leader in this sector.” ■



Construction workers busy at a Vista Projects SAGD project in the Alberta oil sands. Photo courtesy Vista Projects Ltd.