

Rick Ingram is a co-founder of the South Texas Exploration and Production Safety (STEPS) Network and chair of the National STEPS Network. In this interview, Ingram provides background on STEPS, discusses the organization's goals and objectives and explains STEPS' current initiatives to reduce injuries and fatalities in the oil and gas industry.

***Please provide a brief description of your professional background and of your role with the STEPS Network.***

I am employed by BP North America Gas Division, and currently serve as the OSHA Voluntary Protection Programs (VPP) coordinator. I have worked in the oil and gas upstream industry in various roles since 1979 and am a co-founder of the STEPS Network and SafelandUSA. I am the chair of the National STEPS Network, and I also serve as an OSHA Special Government Employee as well as other volunteer positions related to the industry.

OSHA's Corpus Christi area office reached out to the oil and gas exploration and production, or upstream, industry eight years ago through the local ASSE chapter in response to a high rate of fatalities and serious injuries in their South Texas region. OSHA, along with industry leaders, associations, educators and other regulators, founded the original STEPS Network in September 2003 in a cooperative effort to better understand issues behind high incident rates and to find solutions. The team worked to understand how best to serve the industry, why companies would join the organization as well as what would keep people away.

The team understood that companies needing assistance could least afford it. Key decisions were made not to charge fees for membership or meetings, and not to allow sales pitches by speakers. Many hours were dedicated to developing a charter and bylaws with possible future expansion in mind. Those early decisions were sound, as the organization has now grown into the National STEPS (Service Transmission Exploration and Production Safety) Network, comprised of twelve independent regional organizations serving 14 states with more in development.

***How does STEPS promote occupational safety and health within the U.S. oil and gas industry?***

STEPS has effectively bridged a gap in communication between operating companies, contract partners, industry associations, regulators and educators that did not exist previously. Each individual organization and association has a niche group of members. What we have been able to do, especially with the help of OSHA as a partner, is to bring the industry together under one umbrella, and to establish a communication network with a broad reach. As the network has grown, so has H&S Awareness. Local or regional issues are shared across the U.S., while issues and initiatives that could affect the entire industry are shared so that regional or local groups are not continually reinventing the wheel. Members have gained a better understanding of how OSHA standards apply to our industry, and OSHA officials in turn have gained a much more practical understanding of our industry. Working as one industry team has created solidarity for fundamental health and safety excellence by focusing our collective resources and efforts on one industry segment.

***What are the greatest safety, health and environmental (SH&E) hazards currently facing workers in the oil and gas industry, and how is STEPS addressing them?***

Like many others, ours is an inherently dangerous industry with many hazards. Driving, lifting, dropped objects, working at heights, large heavy-moving machinery, excavation, chemicals, the stresses of extreme heat in the summer and extreme cold in the winter, flammable gas and liquids under high pressure, and various industrial hygiene issues are a few of the challenges faced each day. During our meetings, we maintain a broad perspective, but we also concentrate on specific themes when needed.

A key tool used to prevent recurrence of incidents is to share lessons learned from various investigations with our members. OSHA provides an updated statistical report each month, and members participate in valuable

roundtable discussions. Educators provide classes at a reduced cost or at no cost during or in conjunction with some meetings, while pertinent technical information is shared by various associations, such as the International Association of Drilling Contractors, the Association of Energy Service Companies, the American Petroleum Institute, ASSE, the US Border Patrol, The FBI, and various other guest speakers and experts.

***How does STEPS stay informed of urgent issues as well as changing laws and regulations that affect those working in the oil and gas industry?***

STEPS Network members are arguably some of the best informed individuals in industry. The National STEPS Network uses e-mail, monthly meetings and our regional and national websites as communication resources. Through our close association with OSHA, other regulators and industry associations, including state and regional oil and gas associations, we stay apprised of changes as they are proposed and implemented. In many cases, our members participate in the process as industry experts, periodically sharing progress toward proposed changes with their network peers. When changes are made to regulatory rules or industry hazards are identified, our members are notified immediately by e-mail or during monthly meetings.

***What challenges has STEPS faced, and how did it overcome them?***

Our industry is separated by lease and county and state lines, by basins and by corporations. Ensuring that our workers return home safely is best achieved by working together, exchanging ideas and best practices. Safety is discussed, but unfortunately, it is not taken as seriously by some companies or individuals as it has been by others. However, we are seeing a decrease in incidents in many of the regions we serve.

Inviting OSHA to work with our industry was a challenge to some. A wise person once stated that perception is reality. Partnering with a regulator has been a foreign concept to many in our industry and remains so in some regions of the country. The perception of OSHA and industry at opposite ends of a tug of war is rapidly changing due to the dedication and hard work of our OSHA and industry volunteers.

Like any volunteer organization, keeping interest is tough, but the effort is worth it. We use surveys and feedback sessions to obtain new ideas from our members and network with other organizations to find interesting guest speakers. It is rewarding when some of the smaller independent companies walk into a meeting, and it is even better when they return the next month and get involved with a group. We still have much work before us, but we continually seek to improve and learn.

***In what ways is STEPS expanding nationally?***

To date we have twelve regional networks serving fourteen states, with around a thousand companies and over 3500 individual members, and growing.

A primary education initiative born from the STEPS Network is SafeLandUSA, a high-quality basic health and safety orientation developed by our industry for our industry. This effort is gaining momentum and provides a solid foundation of knowledge for our entry-level workforce as well as for industry veterans. SafeLandUSA includes a national database and photo ID system, and is a natural progression toward consistency and standardization. To date, more than 175,000 SafeLandUSA ID cards have been issued to workers.

The National STEPS Network is being developed to provide a communication hub for the industry. The national organization supports the existing regional groups and assists with the development of new ones. Our goal is to eventually serve all oil and gas producing regions in the U.S. At the time of this writing, we are currently working with OSHA in Arkansas, West Virginia, Pennsylvania and other states to expand the network.

***In what ways does STEPS partner with government agencies?***

A founding principal of the network is to partner with OSHA, which has been formalized through OSHA Alliances. Nearly all of these organizations have signed formal alliances with OSHA. The Alliance program is a natural progression in the working relationship and has proven to add value, credibility and sustainability. Please see Alliances at: [www.osha.gov](http://www.osha.gov) for descriptions and listings. Our primary contacts are OSHA Compliance Assistance Specialists, but in many cases, Area Directors, Assistant Area Directors and even regional staff and Regional Administrators are directly involved. Many of our leaders assist with regional safety conferences in partnership with OSHA. One example is the bi-annual Region 6 OSHA Safety Conference for Oil and Gas E&P, [www.oshasafetyconference.com](http://www.oshasafetyconference.com) which had an attendance of over 1200 in 2010. Many also serve on the NIOSH NORA committee for Oil and Gas extraction among other endeavors and agency employees are welcomed to speak or teach at various monthly meetings. We continue to search for meaningful ways to work with others, including government agencies and are always open to suggestion.

***What do you consider to be STEPS' most notable accomplishment?***

The STEPS Network is an all-volunteer organization. Our dedicated volunteers take time from their busy lives and careers to help plan new networks, speak at kick-off meetings and serve on committees because they believe that helping to raise awareness within the industry to save workers from serious incidents is worth the effort. Before the network, we didn't know each other. We were literally working in circles, trying to accomplish the same things. Now we are a united group of friends with a common goal. We have effectively erased the lines of corporate divisions which kept us apart. Most importantly and most rewarding is that we have seen fatality and serious incident rates drop in regions where we have active networks, but we all believe our most notable accomplishments are yet to come.

***What are STEPS' goals and objectives for the remainder of the year?***

We continue to explore opportunities for improvement and expansion both at the regional and national levels. We continue to strive to improve our websites, and we are planning our third annual national conference in Dallas in December 2011.

If you would like to become involved, please contact us. For more information, visit <http://www.nationalstepsnetwork.com>.

**Biography**