Thank you letter, CCC display highlight AES role in Ocean Ranger tragedy

Val Swail of AES Hydrometeorology points to trouble spot on Atlantic Weather Centre map forming part of his Ocean Ranger wall display.

AES staff across Canada will not easily forget Valentine's Day 1982. On that wintry Sunday a fierce storm raged off Newfoundland in the oil-rich offshore area called Hibernia. Winds were so strong and waves so high that a rescue operation was impossible, when the Ocean Ranger, the world's biggest exploratory oil rig toppled into the Atlantic with the loss of all 84 aboard.

The causes of the disaster are extremely complex, but as far as the Weather Service goes, a picture is beginning to emerge of a job well-done despite the doomsday scenario.

A month after the tragedy, ADM Jim Bruce received a letter from Maurice Taschereau, administrator of Canada Oil and Gas Lands (COGLA). Department of Energy, Mines and Resources, praising AES for its support and cooperation.

He said that forecasts sent to COGLA by the Newfoundland Weather Office enabled the two other Hibernia rigs, Sedco 706 and Zapata Ugland to be towed to Marystown, Nfld. for inspection. He also thanked Ice Central, AES Atlantic Weather Centre and Atlantic Region Scientific Services for providing meteorological data and forecasts of the storm itself. He described the overall relationship between AES and COGLA as "pleasant and productive."

Before that, Val Swail of the Canadian Climate Centre's Hydrometeorology section had deemed the lessons of the Ocean Ranger disaster to be so important, he began to assemble a wall display on the catastrophe only 36 hours after it happened. The centrepiece is a large surface analysis map issued by Atlantic Weather Centre for February 15, 1982 and showing an enormous low just a few kilometres NW of the Ocean Ranger site. Right beside it is the Newfoundland marine weather forecast for February 14 predicting gales of up to 70 knots, fog, freezing spray and temperatures down to minus 5C. The weather observation logs of the three rigs are also shown on the board. The one for the Ocean Ranger records winds up to 67 knots, waves up to 10 metres and visibility of roughly one kilometre. Spreading his material across two boards, Mr. Swail displayed other revealing items like a satellite picture for the morning of the sinking, wind-wave analysis charts and, to add a popular touch, some sensational newspaper headlines.

Looking at the wall data, it is clear that the worst weather and oceanographic conditions occurred near the Ocean Ranger with some waves reaching a maximum of 20 metres.

Another part of the display gives general information on the different kinds of oil rigs, operational and experimental. Mr. Swail says that the Canadian Climate Centre is called upon by the manufacturers of some drilling platforms to provide essential meteorological and oceanographic data. For example they calculate maximum wave heights occurring at a particular site once every 100 years. In the case of the Ocean Ranger the figure was 35 metres, a height not reached in February's storm.

Commenting on the display, Mr. Swail said it was important to exhibit material on the disaster at the earliest possible moment. This was because there was intense curiosity about meteorological aspects of the tragedy among AES personnel, petroleum industry employees and the general public. "Obviously AES is playing a vital role in the development of Canada's offshore resources . . . in good times and bad," he added.

The display was scheduled to remain at the CCC until early summer.