

Woodside braces for bird flu

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AN INFLUENZA pandemic has the potential to cripple Australia's oil and gas industry, a Woodside spokesperson said in Perth last week, as health officials monitor a possible outbreak of bird flu in Bali.

Speaking at the 2007 National Oil and Gas Safety Conference, Woodside Energy's chief health and medical officer Andrew Jeremijenko told delegates that a flu pandemic generally strikes every 30 years, meaning Australia and the world was "overdue" for one.



"I believe the [Asian] bird flu could be the next pandemic," he said.

"It hasn't made the jump to humans yet... but if [bird flu] mixed with a human strain it could spread around the world very quickly."

If a flu pandemic hit Australia's shores, Jeremijenko said Woodside had a range of measures to help minimise the impact on its oil and gas operations in the northwest.

"Exports would be down, so our priority would be to keep the gas flowing to the domestic market," he said.

"Our plan would be to keep Goodwyn and North Rankin going, while others like Endeavour we would close down."

Some measures already underway include stockpiling anti-viral drugs and practice drills for staff.

In a breakout, Jeremijenko said Woodside would use infrared cameras to screen people for illness and, if necessary, test and isolate them.

"Rigs can either be the safest place in the world or a death trap," he said.

"But simple things like washing your hands or coughing into a handkerchief can make a big difference."

He also said the company would increase cleaning staff and continue injecting funds into support services, such as local hospitals.

In related news, AAP today quoted Australian health authorities as saying they were closely monitoring a possible outbreak of bird flu on the Indonesian tourist island of Bali.

Balinese officials are investigating whether a 29-year-old woman and her five-year-old daughter died from the deadly H5N1 strain of influenza.

If confirmed, these will become the first cases of the disease for Bali.

Several birds have apparently died, strengthening the case for bird flu.

The virulent Indonesia strain has killed more than 190 people since it surfaced in 2003.

But the World Health Organisation fears that millions more lives are at risk if it mutates into a human flu strain.