

Group of Experts on Coal Mine Methane

Tenth session

28 October 2015, Geneva

Agenda item 3: Opening remarks from the Chair

Thank you very much for the honor of allowing me to chair the Group of Experts on Coal Mine Methane. I am looking forward to working with each of you over the coming two years. We are charged with a number of tasks today and for us to be able to finish with our work we have to follow certain procedures that allow us proceed through our agenda. Over the last two years we have taken on the responsibilities associated with one of the most aggressive work programmes of any of the subsidiary bodies, and I am very happy to say that we have largely completed what we have set out to do. We will review the work that we have completed and then consider the programme of work for the next two years. But before we begin the substantive work of our group I have a few comments stemming from discussions that I have had with many of you regarding the present economic and environmental situation in which we live and operate.

We learned yesterday from the Secretariat that we have unintentionally been remiss in our approach. We understand that although the world is dependent on fossil fuels to power the tools that we use to live our lives individually and as a society, the emissions that stem from the extraction and use of fossil fuels is not a part of international conversation that will happen in Paris in the next month at the COP 21 meeting. Our work is centered on methane that is emitted during the lifecycle of coal extraction. As you are aware, fully half of the world's primary energy is generated from coal. Many of us are in this room have dedicated much, if not all of our careers to dealing with coal mine methane in one way or another: diluting it to makes mines safer by endeavoring to vent a mine properly, extracting it to move it out of the mine, and in the best situations, using or at least destroying it. In gassy coal basins, the gas is present throughout the lifecycle of the coal extractive and abandonment process and unfortunately it doesn't go away if it is simply ignored...in fact in this case ignorance can kill. There is hardly a month that goes by without a reminder of its deadly presence being felt in one mining area of the world or another. Yet there are clearly more pervasive effects coal mine methane that are seen as a result of venting this powerful GHG to the atmosphere—the impact of global climate change is expensive and will become even more so through time, and eventually there will be dire social consequences. We have an opportunity to influence decision makers and politicians if we can find a way to present facts in a cohesive story that is easily understood and compelling.

If we look at today's coal industry, with the seemingly ever-decreasing prices of coal, and the prevalence of low cost natural gas, companies are reeling from the loss of revenue and are faced with difficult economic decisions on how to lower their production costs in order to survive and compete. These are the times when there are many temptations to cut corners by not implementing the best practices of methane management; those very practices that would result in the beneficial use or abatement of the methane that will otherwise escape to the atmosphere.

We are seeing wholesale restructuring of the coal industry. But the economic restructuring of the industry will not necessarily result in a new way of managing the coal resource and the associated gas resources. Many coal companies have declared bankruptcy seeking court sanctioned restructuring that will end with a healthy looking balance sheet and shareholders looking to profit through becoming the low cost producer. **How many newly restructured companies will emerge with an imbued sense of responsibility to the worker and the environment?** None of us know the answer to that question, but we have the tools to influence this emerging future. I have a favorite Chinese proverb that helps me sort things out when confronted with what seems like an overwhelming challenge: A disaster is an opportunity born on an ill wind; or as Steve Jobs purportedly said while producing yet another must-have electronic marvel: I see opportunity where others see only the challenges. In other words—the way we see the future determines the actions that we take. By the virtue that we are here together at this meeting says that we have the intention to make a difference. Let us as a group work on developing the views that we need to promote to a restructuring industry that will out of necessity be seeking new business models with which to enter and face a changing economic environment, let us produce those compelling stories to convey to our world's decision makers that ensures that they lead change in proper direction. Let's take up our next two year work programme with a renewed commitment to promoting implementation of best practices. Let us use this work environment afforded to us by the United Nations where representatives of many countries with diverse and sometimes disparate goals can come to together on this platform without the biases of the outside world, to discuss great ideas and give them value by using them to help our world find a healthy and sustainable way forward. I pledge to do this and hope that each of you will as well.

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