

The History of the Oil and Gas Exploration in Italy

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ABSTRACT

The history of exploration in Italy comprised four periods: 1860, the drilling of the Ozzano well divided the pre-industrial from the industrial periods. 1944, the discovery of Caviaga separates the pioneers' from the growth and maturity periods. 2007, the low exploratory activity marks the decline period. Pre-industrial Period- The populations that inhabited the country took advantage of the seepages. An interesting testimony is an ingot of purified bitumen dated 1st century AD with carved the mine owner's name. F. Ariosto (1430-1499) described the antique production method of the "Santa Caterina's oil". J. Stradanus (1523-1605) described a sea surface harvesting of oil using natural sponges. Pioneers' period- It started in 1860 with the first modern well driven by oil occurrences. The overall results were discouraging with the discovery of only a dozen of small fields concentrated in the North Apennines. The thrust belt poorly preserves the traps integrity and this is the main reason for the abundance of seepages. In 1939, started an unconventional production of biogenic shallow gas dissolved in water in the eastern part of the Po Plain named "Polesine". In 1943, it was producing more gas than all the other conventional fields. The Growth and Maturity Period- It stretches from 1944 to 2007. It was the "golden age" with the discovery of hundreds of fields. The largest gas discovery was Agostino-Porto Garibaldi in 1968, a giant of 600 Mboe. The largest oil discovery occurred in 1988 with Monte Alpi, a giant of 850 Mboe. During 1994, Italy reached a remarkable total production close to half million boe/d. The cumulative production amount to 6.4 Bboe of which the 77% is gas and 23% is oil. The Decline Period- Since 2007, the exploration investments reached an historical minimum. Several discoveries are on waiting list for development approval. A 2010 law bans the drilling within 12 miles from the coast. The bureaucratic process is quite tricky since there are different authorities involved. Public opinion is against any kind of up-stream operations. As a result, no offshore exploratory wells were drilled since 2008. In spite of the potential still existing, the choice is to leave the "domestic" oil and gas underground to prevent the politically undesired NIMBY effect from the population. Recently, new acreages became available in the Sardinia Sea and in the Medina Bank. Only future will tell if this is the right key to unlock again the exploration in Italy.