
Essential plants go to extremes to stay online

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Owners of essential industrial plants that run round the clock are having to take extraordinary measures to keep them in operation, as the COVID-19 virus threatens to wreak havoc on shift and worker arrangements.

The actions being taken at refinery, smelting and chemical plants mirror those being implemented at power plants, and come ahead of an emergency teleconference on Monday by the Australian Energy Market Operator with energy market participants and industry to discuss threats to energy security and reliability from the global pandemic.

They come after [federal Energy Minister Angus Taylor told his state and territory counterparts on Friday](#) that the energy industry would be faced with an unprecedented challenge over the next six months given the critical need to keep the power grid safely and security operating through the COVID-19 crisis.



Tomago Aluminium CEO Matt Howell said the smelter would need an exemption in the event of a lockdown on mobility due to COVID-19. **Darren Pateman**

Steve Bell, chief executive of Qenos, which makes basic plastic film used in multiple household and industrial products, said protecting operational teams at the company's plants in Mascot south of Sydney, and Altona near Melbourne, had become a major concern.

"If we were to have an outbreak of the virus here that got into one of the shift teams, that would cause quite a headache," Mr Bell told *The Australian Financial Review*.

"You can't just turn these things on and off. It's not like we can turn them off and park them for a week and come back and restart them. It's not as straightforward as that."

Mr Bell said he had spoken with peers across the industrial sector to swap notes on actions being taken to keep plants that run 24/7 working, including tightening access to control rooms, minimising contact between personnel, and banning visitors from the site, as well as fully disinfecting work areas between shifts.

"We're all doing a lot of work, and this is quite a diversion from the other day-to-day activities in terms of how do we manage through it if you lose key people, what is our continuity plan and strategy," he said.

"Apart from the fact that we provide products that go into everyday supply chains that are getting challenged right now with all this crazy panic buying, it's how do you keep the operation running in the event that you lose key people."

At Tomago aluminium smelter in NSW, key IT and process automation teams had been split in two, doing opposite shifts at home and at work for half the week, then swapping around, said Tomago Aluminium chief executive Matt Howell.

"You've got half the team working at home so the whole team is never in one place at one time, and with technology now there are lots of functions you can legitimately do at home," said Mr Howell, who will dial into AEMO's Monday teleconference.

"We have done the same thing for our payroll team and our IT team. And we've got the place soaked in sanitiser."

He said that in many operational areas of the smelter, including the potlines, around the carbon plants and in the anode plant, workers already wore top-quality "P2" respirators as part of their work, meaning they already had full protection.

Mr Howell said Tomago Aluminium had been working on a potential epidemic scenario for coronavirus for months as part of a crisis-management exercise, meaning the plant was well prepared in securing supply chains for products and additional measures to protect staff. [The smelter's potlines can only be out of operation for up to three hours](#) before they "freeze", ruining the equipment.

He said he had held discussions with the state and federal government on the "criticality" of the smelter, which would require an exemption in the event of wide-ranging restrictions on public movement.

Split work groups

"We simply have to have our people here; you can't just say, we want you to switch off for two weeks," he said. "We're regarded as critical infrastructure, just like a power station."

At the Geelong oil refinery in Victoria, Viva Energy said it had split work groups and arranged rostering so there was little crossover between teams, increased distance between workers, reduced shared workspaces and stepped-up cleaning.

Alinta Energy, which owns the Loy Yang B baseload coal power generator in Victoria, has taken similar steps and is preparing additional measures in the case the pandemic worsens. It is also reconsidering a unit upgrade scheduled for later this year.

"As an operator of critical infrastructure we have been conducting regular emergency exercises to prepare for potential emergencies such as this," said Tony Hicks, general manager of Loy Yang B. "We are well drilled and as ready as we can be."

"Looking ahead, our planning has already accounted for worst-case scenarios, and we believe we have workable arrangements that can be rolled out if and when the situation escalates."