'Very complicated': Woodside's CEO talks Sunrise, wider LNG plans and challenges

Meg O'Neill tells Upstream the Sunrise LNG project is complicated by dual-government negotiations, but remains a growth engine with Browse and Louisiana LNG

Xu Yihe in Updstream, 26 May 2025

Woodside chief executive, Meg O'Neill, at WGC 2025 in Beijing, China. Photo: XU YIHE / UPSTREAM

The long-delayed Greater Sunrise gas development in the Timor Sea remains mired in diplomatic and regulatory complexity, Woodside Energy chief executive, Meg O'Neill, told *Upstream* in an exclusive interview.

Despite industry hopes for **momentum following feasibility work in 2024**, the project — straddling the maritime border between Timor-Leste and Australia — has yet to move forward, as negotiations over fiscal terms and development plans continue to stall.

O'Neill told Upstream at the World Gas Conference in Beijing that the Greater Sunrise fields are a complex development scenario due to their location across the maritime boundary between Australia and Timor-Leste.

Negotiating fiscal terms with both governments has proven to be challenging, as has reaching consensus among the joint venture partners and the two nations on the optimal development approach. Woodside and its partners are continuing to engage with all stakeholders to determine the most viable path forward.

"The Greater Sunrise fields have a very complicated setting so they straddle the border between Australia and Timor-Leste and negotiating the fiscal terms with the two governments is very complicated, and getting alignment with the joint venture and the two governments on how best to develop the field is also complicated," she said.

"So we continue to work with the joint venture partners and the two governments on finding the best path forward."

The Sunrise comments come as Woodside seeks to reinvigorate its LNG growth agenda through the Sunrise and Browse projects, and its Louisiana LNG project in the US, while also positioning itself as a long-term partner for Asian energy buyers—particularly in China.

Satisfied with quality of China yards

Meanwhile, Woodside has faced challenges at key projects including Scarborough and Sangomar, and Upstream asked O'Neill about her level of satisfaction of the construction work in China.

While the Sangomar floating production, storage and offloading vessel had to be moved from China to Singapore for final commissioning — largely due to Covid disruptions — she stressed that the build quality was never in question.

“The product we received from the Chinese yard was of high quality,” she said.

“We see it in the reliability and operational performance that we’re getting now that we’ve been operating for 11 months, really good quality construction.

“Scarborough is the same,” she said.

O’Neill visited the Scarborough floating production last week visited the Scarborough floater at CIMC Raffles yard in China’s Yantai city, where topsides and hull construction were integrated.

“The quality of construction is top of the line,” she said, expressing interest in continuing work with Chinese engineering, procurement and construction firms on future projects like Browse and Sunrise.

Difficult conditions in Australia

In Australia, Woodside faces a tough landscape, particularly in terms of upstream exploration. Regulatory hurdles, environmental opposition and government ambivalence to licensing rounds and acquiring marine seismic have made new exploration increasingly difficult.

Still, O’Neill pointed to the Australian government’s 2023 Future Gas Strategy as a foundation for collaboration.

The strategy makes it clear that natural gas will be part of Australia’s energy mix through 2050 and beyond — and that Australian gas has a role in helping Asia meet its energy needs, she said.

“We want to work with the Albanese government to make that strategy a reality,” including easing seismic survey rules and streamlining environmental approvals.

Such approvals remain a sticking point. The Browse project is s ll awaiting sign-off from both Western Australia’s Environmental Protection Authority and the federal environment department. Meanwhile, Woodside has revised development drilling plans to address environmental concerns — including protections for pygmy blue whales and sea turtles.

“So we’re cautiously optimistic that the EPA will find we have adequately mitigated environmental impacts and be ready to progress approval of the Browse’s environmental application,” she said. Legal challenges are also a factor. Environmental groups have targeted Scarborough’s environment plan, but O’Neill said Woodside had built sufficient timing buffers into its project schedule.

Overseas LNG projects and partnerships

Meanwhile, on the international front, Woodside has attracted attention for its proposed Louisiana LNG project in the US. O’Neill confirmed that discussions are under way with Saudi Aramco, which is evaluating a potential stake in the project.

“We were pleased to announce our collaboration agreement with Aramco,” she said, adding Woodside has not communicated any timeline yet.

“We want to make sure that they have me to have a proper review.”

On the global LNG market, O’Neill is focused on long-term partnerships.

“So it’s important that we recognise near-term political uncertainty, but at the end of the day, it doesn’t change the fact that our customers and our customer nations need LNG as part of their energy mix.”

Woodside currently supplies around 3 million tonnes per annum of LNG to China, primarily through long-term contracts ed to the North West Shelf project. Spot cargoes are added opportunistically, but O’Neill sees the future rooted in firm, long-term commitments.

Woodside recently signed a 15-year LNG supply agreement with China Resources Gas International, scheduled to begin in 2027.

The deal underscores China’s role as a cornerstone customer, building on a decades-long relationship that began when the North West Shelf project delivered Australia’s first LNG cargo to China in 2006.