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Gas Strategies Group

10 Saint Bride Street
London UK
EC4A 4AD

ISSN: 0964-8496

T: +44(0) 20 7332 9900
W: www.gasstrategies.com
Twitter @GasStrategies

Editorials

+44(0) 20 7332 9957
editor@gasstrategies.com

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+44(0) 20 7332 9976
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OBITUARY: Kathleen Eisbrenner – LNG pioneer and ‘force of nature’ who defied the FSRU sceptics

Kathleen Eisbrenner – the founder, chairman and former CEO of the US LNG project developer NextDecade best known for pioneering the concept of floating regasification – has died at the age of 58. The cause of her death, announced by NextDecade on Friday, has not been disclosed.

Eisbrenner “changed the face of the gas industry first at home in the US then the world,” said James Ball, erstwhile editor-in-chief of Gas Matters and former managing partner and member of the board of Gas Strategies.

“No words can begin to describe the force of nature that was Kathleen Eisbrenner: visionary, pioneer and possessed of an iron will to succeed, combined with an infectious enthusiasm and a charm to make people deliver,” he added.

Eisbrenner set out as a pipeline engineer in an era when few women entered, let alone rose to leadership positions in the industry. She became a “conscious promoter of women in the energy industry and every woman working in the industry today who is able to take for granted their role as engineer, executive and trail blazer owes her a great deal of gratitude,” Ball said.

Eisbrenner is best known for promoting floating storage and regasification units (FSRUs) when the concept was still deemed to be a revolutionary idea that might never catch on. FSRUs were first commercialised by Excelerate Energy, a company she founded and led until 2007.

FSRUs are an established part of the industry today and played a major role in opening new markets for LNG. Of the 23 new markets that emerged between 2008 and 2018, 12 chose FSRU-based terminals for their first projects.

“They are there because of a small team with a handful of ships, visionary backers and the leadership of Kathleen Eisbrenner who delivered the world’s first dockside FSRU terminal, the UK’s Teesside Gas Port in February 2009,” Ball added.

However, the concept initially attracted much scepticism when Eisbrenner began promoting it at industry conferences in the early 2000s. At that time, LNG was a niche industry where attitudes tended towards the conservative.

Eisbrenner was undaunted – and has been resoundingly vindicated. “It is with a great deal of pride that I see so much support for FSRUs – perhaps particularly since it was a tough beginning,” she said in a 2017 interview with LNG Business Review [1].

“The launch was indeed difficult. Even before I founded Excelerate, while at El Paso, I faced serious pushback on the strategy. Fortunately, I found a greater number of advocates than naysayers and the

rest is history!"

Always ahead of the curve

Eisbrenner established Excelerate Energy in July 2003. The following December she and her team signed agreements with El Paso to acquire the "Energy Bridge" technology and assets that she had worked on while chief commercial officer at El Paso Global LNG. The technology enabled the offshore regasification of LNG using an integrated regas vessel and buoy system capable of delivering gas into offshore pipelines.

Around that time, concern over a perceived US gas supply 'crisis' led to a stampede to build regas terminals. Excelerate led the pack when its Gulf Gateway terminal, based on the Excelsior FSRU, became the first new US regas facility for quarter of a century when commissioned in March 2005.

The US regas rush ran into the sand as the shale gas revolution began to take off in 2007-8 and the US began a transition from importer of LNG to exporter. The Gulf Gateway terminal was retired in 2011.

In 2007 Eisbrenner left Excelerate to head up Shell's LNG business, taking up the position of executive vice-president for global LNG, based at the company's Dutch headquarters in the Hague. She took on responsibility for Shell's LNG development portfolio and leading LNG trading, and was part of the final investment decision (FID) team on the Prelude floating LNG (FLNG) development, currently being commissioned offshore Australia.

In 2010 she founded NextDecade to capitalise on the huge growth in US gas production as the shale revolution gathered momentum, this time leading the rush to develop LNG exports. She led NextDecade to its Nasdaq listing in July 2017, and the company is hoping to reach FID on its Rio Grande LNG project this year.

Eisbrenner – who was amused by the fact that her surname is German for "ice burners" – handed the role of CEO over to Matthew Schatzman in February 2018 but continued to serve as the company's chairman until her death.

"It is with great sorrow that we announce the untimely passing of our friend and colleague," said Schatzman on Friday. "Kathleen was a true energy industry pioneer. We at NextDecade are grateful for her foresight and leadership, without which we would not be where we are today.

"We extend our deepest sympathies to Kathleen's devoted husband, Ray, and the Eisbrenner family." - AF/SK



Consulting

+44 (0) 20 7332 9900
consult@gasstrategies.com



Alphatania Training

+44 (0) 20 7332 9910
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