

## Woodside calls on parties to address skills shortage

By Emma Alberici

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Woodside's Goodwyn A offshore gas production facility. The company says a lack of skilled staff is limiting output (File photo). (AFP)

The chief of Australian oil and gas giant Woodside Petroleum has criticised both major political parties for not doing enough to address the country's skills shortage.

Woodside CEO and managing director Don Voelte is calling on whoever wins government at the election on November 24 to relax immigration laws to make it easier for energy and mining companies to recruit skilled staff from overseas.

In the 2004 election campaign, Prime Minister John Howard tried to address the skills shortage by announcing that

his Government would set up 28 new technical trade colleges.

Three years later, he has committed a further \$2 billion to the establishment of another 100 technical colleges.

But the country's biggest oil and gas explorer is finding that the need is more urgent than that.

Mr Voelte says if the Coalition and Labor want to make the most of the resources boom for Australia, then more needs to be done.

"It's a situation where it's extraordinary times for Australia," he said.

"I guess the question [that] has to be covered is, 'Do we want to do all this or not as a country?' and then we have to decide that if we want to do all this, how we best address it.

"I think it's going to take more than what's on the table right now that has been offered up.

"It's not just Woodside. I think we've talked enough to my peers in mining companies and other E and P [energy and petroleum] companies, and I think we come up to about the same place."

Mr Voelte cites the lack of skilled staff among the reasons companies in Australia can't meet production targets, and therefore can't satisfy the global demand for Australia's resources.

## **Immigration policies**

He has told the ABC's *Lateline Business* that immigration policies need to be relaxed to encourage skilled staff to come in from overseas.

"I think that the rest of the world, or at least a portion of the rest of the world, are willing to trade professions and jobs a lot more freely than maybe what some of the immigration laws here allow," he said.

"I think some of the issues around the unions are issues that have to be addressed and talked to."

Mr Voelte says whichever party wins government should look into relaxing 457 visas and extending the amount of time a skilled worker can spend working in Australia.

"The amount of sponsorship that companies can give - clearly this has to be discussed to make sure that there is not a negative impact to the Australian worker on wages or on amount of work hours that they want to work - things like that," he said.