Positive changes in the air

gasworld interviews Marie Ffolkes, President of Air Products Industrial Gases-Americas.

By Bob Croce, Senior Editor.

Since being named President, Industrial Gases-Americas in 2015, Marie Ffolkes has led her large Air Products division through a period of significant growth and positive change. Her main role for this international major gas producer is to drive strategy implementation and profitability for the company’s IG operations in the US, Canada, Mexico and South America.

Prior to joining Air Products, Ffolkes worked in senior executive positions for Tenneco, Johnson Controls, and General Electric. I recently interviewed her about her time so far at Air Products, and the company’s go-forward strategy.

gasworld: Thank you very much for taking the time to speak with us. Since joining Air Products as President of the Industrial Gases-Americas division, we’re going to assume that it’s been a very busy and exciting time for you career-wise, and for the company. Can you tell us about some of the achievements of which you’re most proud?

Ffolkes: We have made great progress in streamlining the organization into sub-regions to more effectively put decision-making and accountability into the field and closer to our customers. By creating our new sub-region structure, in effect localizing our business, this has enhanced opportunities for empowerment at the local level resulting in faster decision making. This allows us to be more responsive to the needs of our customers and help them solve problems, which creates innovative uses for industrial gases.

We, of course, are also proud of our teams for new wins and growth – from our new worldscale HyCO plant for Covestro in Baytown, Texas, to the recent startup of our new air separation unit at Big River Steel in Osceola, Arkansas, to our latest large win for Chemours in New Johnsonville, Tennessee. We have a robust list of opportunities for more growth and investment, and I meet with my team weekly to move these opportunities to fruition.

“We are actively seeking opportunities to geographically expand our footprint in CO₂”

gasworld: It sounds like you’ve been adding a lot to an already impressive product portfolio for the Industrial Gases-Americas division. What portion of Air Products’ total sales does this represent? We do know that it’s a very large division, with regional offices in North America, South America and Mexico.

Ffolkes: Air Products’ Industrial Gases-Americas division produces atmospheric gases (oxygen, nitrogen, argon, and rare gases), process gases (hydrogen, helium, carbon dioxide, carbon monoxide, syngas and specialty gases) and equipment, such as air separation units and non-cryogenic generators, for the production or processing of gases. The company’s Industrial Gases business is organized and operated regionally, and the Industrial Gases-Americas division accounts for approximately 44% of the company’s total sales.

gasworld: That’s a very large portfolio, and I understand that, since becoming President of the division, one of your major goals was to help transform this business segment by helping to combine the various industrial gases businesses into one unit. How is that process going? What have been some of the challenges here, and what are some of the noteworthy accomplishments so far?

Ffolkes: When I joined Air Products, the company was in the early stages of a major restructuring with the goal of becoming the safest and best performing industrial gas company in the world, providing excellent service to our customers. As part of this strategy, we reorganized our Industrial Gases division on a geographic basis and moved to a decentralized, simpler, and more efficient structure that created true accountability at many levels of the organization. This helped to create a culture of empowerment that enables our employees to act with safety, simplicity, speed and self-confidence.

We have completed our transformation from a global business to a geographically-based organization. The team is energized with their new roles and empowerment.

gasworld: Since this is our CO₂-themed issue this month, can you tell us about Air Products’ recent investments in carbon dioxide production, sourcing and acquisition in the Americas? We understand that there have been significant investments in liquid CO₂.

Ffolkes: Since our acquisition of EPCO in 2013, Air Products now has business in North America. This is a business in which we have participated in Europe, Asia, and Mexico for many years, so we know it well. We have fully integrated CO₂ into our regional structure and see many opportunities to grow the business with our customers based upon our market knowledge in food and beverage, water treatment, welding, sales to distributors, and other application areas. We are actively seeking opportunities to geographically expand our footprint in CO₂.

We have improved the operations of
the CO₂ business by integrating it into the mainstream of Air Products, and our customers have noticed our improved reliability, responsiveness, and service, which is beneficial to their growth as well as our future growth. When our customers are successful, we are as well.

gasworld: Speaking of CO₂, we have an article in this month’s issue (page 36) that talks about the Freshline® IQ Freezer, which we saw a demo of at the recent Boston Seafood Expo. Can you tell us more about this application, and how it’s being marketed?
Ffolkes: Our new Freshline® IQ tunnel freezer offers food processors increased efficiency, economy and hygiene. The freezer is based on 10-foot modular units that can be quickly and easily integrated into a customer’s existing production line. The Freshline IQ freezer is ideal for small- to mid-size food processors and start-up food manufacturers, who want to quickly begin freezing high quality products with minimal up-front capital investment. The Freshline IQ freezer is a practical solution for food processors who want to upgrade to continuous freezing, alleviate a bottleneck in their operation, or grow and diversify their existing product line. The freezer offers an optional remote monitoring system, enabled by the Industrial Internet of Things (IoT), that either allows food processors or Air Products to track real time variables or remotely troubleshoot issues to ensure optimization of the system.

gasworld: We’ve also been reading how Air Products-Americas is putting an even larger strategic focus, and making major investment in hydrogen, including agreeing to a long-term contract to supply hydrogen to Marathon Petroleum’s Gulf Coast refining operation, and the construction of a new plant in western Canada. Can you tell us more about the Air Products strategy around hydrogen?
Ffolkes: Naturally, our strategy is to maintain our position as the world’s
leading hydrogen supplier. Along the Gulf Coast, we operate the world’s largest hydrogen plant and pipeline network system, supplying customers with over 1.4 billion feet of hydrogen per day from over 22 hydrogen production facilities. We recently announced that we will be increasing hydrogen supply to Marathon Petroleum from this pipeline, and we will continue to grow with other refiners on the pipeline network.

We also recently launched a Hydrogen Services Business to help customers improve the reliability and productivity of their own hydrogen plants. Air Products owns and operates over 100 hydrogen plants around the world. With our extensive experience and best-in-class operational know-how, we can help our customers solve a wide range of issues within their own hydrogen plants.

gasworld: Of course, at the center of a lot of what Air Products produces are air gases. How are plans going for the new ASU in Johnsonville, TN, which is scheduled to go operational in 2018. How will this new plant help Air Products, which was actually founded as an oxygen company in 1940, better meet customer demand in the southeastern US for oxygen, nitrogen and argon?

Ffolkes: Air Products announced in October 2016 that we were selected to supply air gases to Chemours’ titanium dioxide production facility in New Johnsonville, Tennessee. As part of this project, we will build a new air separation and compressed dry air (CDA) plant to serve Chemours’ needs under a long-term contract. We will also serve the regional market in the Southeastern U.S. with liquid argon produced at this plant.

gasworld: And while we are on the subject of air gases, can you tell us more about some of your division’s future around ASU capacity, and your air gases strategy overall?

Ffolkes: Air Products has identified several geographic areas in the Americas where we see opportunities to invest or add capacity to better serve the needs of the local markets. For example, in January of this year, we announced an expansion of our Middletown, Ohio, facility. There are several other very interesting geographies where we see growth opportunity and are seeking large-volume customers to piggyback liquids production capacity.

“Innovation and creating new applications and markets for our gases have always been a strength...”

gasworld: What is your overall vision for Air Products Americas as you close in on entering your third year as division president? What will be some of the large initiatives the division will undertake later this year, and into 2018?

Ffolkes: We have achieved remarkable safety performance and have broken all our records in the Americas and overall at Air Products this year. We will continue this focus, as nothing is more important than the safety of our employees and our customers. I have been extremely impressed with the strong safety culture at Air Products since I arrived in 2015, and I continue to be impressed by our teams who are working hard to further improve our results.

We have been quite successful in improving productivity and efficiency in many key areas of our business, including distribution, power, plant operations and maintenance, with a laser focus on exceeding our customers’ increasing expectations. Our new structure has unlocked the talent and creativity of our people, and the results are evident. As we further our continuous improvement efforts and best practice sharing to achieve a lower delivered cost structure, this will ensure we maintain our competitiveness to enable future growth – which I am particularly focused upon this year, as well as the next three to five years.

Our strategic objectives are clearly defined around profitable growth, superior operational excellence, and delivering market winning products through differentiated innovation to our customers, all of which will lead to solid opportunities and leadership development for our talented people.

Innovation and creating new applications and markets for our gases have always been a strength...”