

IN THE SPOTLIGHT

Mark Witte

GDF SUEZ's American weatherman

Large energy companies can no longer do without their weathermen. The Frank Deboosere of GDF SUEZ is the American Mark Witte. "I convert the weather directly into megawatts."

BRUSSELS | Weather and energy have become increasingly intertwined over the last few years. The amount of energy we consume and the amount of energy that can be generated is becoming ever more dependent on weather conditions. The emergence of wind and solar energy has made a significant contribution to this situation. Over the last few years the large energy companies have enlisted the help of meteorologists like Mark Witte to closely monitor the weather's impact on energy consumption and generation. He has forecasted the weather at GDF SUEZ, Electrabel's parent company, since October 2010. Witte, an American citizen, works in the French energy group's trading department in Brussels. Why, in 2011, is the traditional radio or television weather forecast no longer adequate for GDF SUEZ's traders? Mark Witte doesn't need much time to think about the answer. "The main priority of the traditional weather forecast is to determine whether it is still a good idea to have a summer barbeque or whether one's holiday will be a disaster. However I convert the weather directly into megawatts," explains GDF SUEZ's weatherman. Witte prefers to describe himself as an energy meteorologist. Furthermore GDF SUEZ cannot really afford to wait for Frank Deboosere's forecasts. The energy company's traders already need a weather report first thing in the morning. Their job is to purchase electricity, natural gas, coal and even oil on the energy markets. The day's weather can acutely influence market prices for these energy sources.

Each day Witte is also the first person at his desk. At six thirty in the morning he can be found engrossed in the weather maps covering his six screens. The objective is to have his first weather report of the day ready for the traders between eight and nine in the morning. Producing an overview of the differences in temperature throughout Europe is simply not enough. He explains, "the report must also include an estimate of the number hours of

sunshine as well as the chance of a lot of cloud or very little, wind speeds and the chance of rain. Wind in Germany can make a huge difference. On a windy day all the wind energy parks in Germany generate as much power as fifty traditional gas-powered electricity plants. No wind means that energy traders must source large volumes of power. If my weather forecast is accurate then the traders earn back my month's salary in just a few hours," reveals Mark Witte.

Witte's work does not end with his initial morning weather report. He monitors the weather maps and weather computers throughout the day so that he can quickly detect changing weather conditions. He must also endeavour to produce weather forecasts for a week, month or even a few months ahead. Today the greatest challenge is to predict what sort of winter we can expect. At the moment Mark Witte risks predicting an extremely harsh winter. However he is cautious, adding that the probability of this is seventy percent.

This year has already illustrated that making these kinds of seasonal predictions presents quite a challenge. After an extremely dry and summery spring, energy companies faced a serious challenge. According to Han Sinnema, who manages GDF SUEZ's Brussels trading room, the ultimate question was whether the summer months would also be extremely dry and sunny. This could lead to a reduction in power generation, because insufficient amounts of cooling water are available as a result of water levels being too low or water temperatures in rivers being too high. Sinnema adds that it can force electricity prices to rise sharply. Winter and summer are usually the most exciting months for an energy meteorologist such as Mark Witte. Heat waves and arctic weather conditions can quickly and significantly increase gas and electricity consumption and/or generation. "Accurate predictions of how high or low temperatures will be are not necessary. However we must be as precise as possible when forecasting how long the extremely hot or cold weather will last," explains Mark Witte.

GDF SUEZ's traders are not just interested in the weather in Europe. Mark Witte monitors the weather all over the globe. Energy trading for the French energy company also extends to oil and coal. When it comes to oil, monitoring the American hurricane season is particularly important. With regards to coal, on one occasion Mark Witte even had to try and forecast the end of the rainy season, the monsoon season, in India. This is because the monsoon season as good as paralyses India's coal exports. (pse)

"The traders earn back an accurate weather forecast and my monthly salary in just a few hours"

BIO

- 51 years of age
- American nationality
- Born in Texas
- Studied economy at A&M University in Texas
- Taught for eight years at Blinn College, Texas
- Then studied meteorology at Oklahoma University
- Worked as a meteorologist for various American energy companies since 1998
- Began working as a weatherman for the German energy company E.ON in 2009
- Has been working as a meteorologist in GDF SUEZ's Trading department in Brussels since October 2010.