



Case Study

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Benthic Geotech tackles offshore exploration with TC Communications

Pioneering Australian deep-sea exploration company connects crew and clients across Inmarsat satellite network

Sydney, Australia – Two-storey swells, gale-force winds and a shifting, toothpaste-like ocean floor are just some of the more common hazards facing the subsea geotechnical survey crews of Benthic Geotech, a pioneering Australian company specialising in sampling the sea floor for its oil, engineering and scientific clients around the world.

Using large seagoing vessels, Benthic Geotech's teams operate a six-metre tall sea floor drilling system called PROD (Portable Remotely Operated Drill) at depths in excess of two kilometres below sea level. PROD collects soil and floorbed samples using a combination of drills and coring tools while delivering data to the surface via an 'umbilical' cable containing fibre optic strands.

Since August 2008 the company has relied on the high-speed global coverage of Inmarsat's satellite network, using equipment supplied by Inmarsat Gold Partner TC Communications, to maintain contact with – and ensure the safety of – its offshore teams.

"We're one of only two companies in the world that can provide these geotechnical services required by large oil companies, and other offshore industries, to collect the level of accurate sample data from the ocean floor at depths safely in excess of one kilometre," says Kazim Reza, Chief Financial Officer, Benthic Geotech. "We recently successfully completed our first West African project, and another in Norway – where we were chosen ahead of several other global geotechnical survey companies – and will soon be deploying our second PROD unit to expand our operations around the world."

Kazim says while most seagoing vessels have their own satellite communication systems, the nature of the work the company conducts means clients often require their own systems for security purposes, separate to which Benthic Geotech needs an always-on system for communicating with colleagues back at its operations centres.

"We previously used a satellite modem that was too much hassle to learn, and consequently went unused much of the time," he says. "Because of the project-based nature of our work, we needed a system that was easy to use, and gave us the flexibility to lease it on a case-by-case basis as required. TC Communications demonstrated its knowledge of our business by providing us with a solution that not only matched our technical and financial requirements, but also provided additional functionality like broadband data, which gives us an extra value-add service to offer our clients."

Benthic Geotech's teams are today equipped with Inmarsat's FB250 FleetBroadband service, the first maritime communications service to provide cost-effective broadband data and voice, simultaneously, through a compact antenna, on a global basis.

"For the first time since I can remember, I haven't heard any of our staff complaining about the satellite terminal," quips Reza. "Seriously, it was easy to install, and has proven reliable and easy to use ever since."

“Even more impressive is the level of service we’ve experienced from TC Communications. For example, a few months ago the terminal was left on accidentally – costing us money for every minute it was polling the satellite network – and we got a call from TC to alert us to switch it off.

“Our business is not a nine-to-five operation, and support calls can come in at any time of day or night,” he adds. “TC Communications has demonstrated its worth by setting up training for our crew at their base of mobilisation, so we wouldn’t have to delay a project to get potentially life-saving training on the system. It’s this commitment to the relationship that sets otherwise good technology apart from a great solution.”

Todd McDonell, CEO of TC Communications, says that in an industry fraught with danger, amid the very important and sensitive engineering and scientific work, a bulletproof communications system is one of the most important pieces of equipment for any offshore crew.

“It’s a primary link for our customers in cases where things threaten to go wrong,” says McDonell. “Sometimes it’s the little things, like giving crew direct contact with their families, which can make all the difference on a long-term project, and other times the radio comes into its own as a conduit for mission-critical operational support.”

“FleetBroadband is a significant advance on previous satellite services, enabling our customers around the world to expand their operations and extract maximum value from their communications investment,” says Piers Cunningham, Inmarsat’s Head of Maritime Business. “TC Communications has yet again been able to adapt the technology to the needs of its clients, and in doing so has delivered real business benefits for Benthic Geotech where, with its previous technology, there were none to speak of.”

Benthic Geotech is looking to expand its service by offering real-time data communications from the PROD teams back to its clients using Inmarsat’s FleetBroadband data capabilities. The service, says Reza, will be of particular interest to larger companies looking to make firm but fast decisions on deep ocean construction work, who then need accurate, to-the-metre reports of site conditions prior to starting their operations.

“Our clients typically want as much information as they can get about a site before they send out the ‘heavy equipment’ to start building oil platforms or laying undersea pipes or cables,” he says. “This information is not always easy to come by, and given the ocean floor has the consistency of toothpaste, the faster information can be relayed back to clients, the sooner they can make informed decisions.”

About TC Communications

TC Communications is the pre-eminent satellite communications specialist in the South East Asian region. A multi-award winning Australian owned and managed company, TC is the only Gold Accredited Inmarsat Service Provider in the region and is a Quality Assured Company with membership to the TIO. Well recognised as being on the leading edge of technological advances in mobile satellite communications across air, land and sea, TC has an impressive client base which includes the Royal Australian Navy, The ADF, major Federal Government departments, key media players and blue chip mining, resources and construction companies. Mature relationships with key industry players allow TC to develop the best possible bespoke solutions for this very niche sector. For more information visit www.tc.com.au.

About Inmarsat

Inmarsat plc (LSE: ISAT) is the leading provider of global mobile satellite communications. Since 1979, Inmarsat has been providing reliable voice and high-speed data communications to governments, enterprises and other organisations, with a range of services that can be used on land, at sea or in the air. The company’s services are delivered through a global network of more than 500 distribution partners and service providers operating in 180 countries. For the half-year ended 30 June 2008, Inmarsat plc had total revenue of US\$ 485.5 million. More information can be found at www.inmarsat.com.

About Benthic Geotech

Benthic Geotech provides sub sea bed data gathering services for engineering, geotechnical, and scientific studies. The company develops and operates the PROD (Portable Remotely Operated Drill), an Australian-designed, self-contained, remotely-operated seafloor drilling system. Established in 1997, Benthic Geotech is a 100 per cent privately owned company based in Sydney, with offices in Houston and Singapore. For more information, visit www.bgt.com.au.