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Prevention of air pollution from ships
Lower sulphur levels might foster shift from sea to road

In 2008 the Marine Environmental Protection Committee (MEPC) of the International Maritime Organization (IMO) unanimously adopted in its 58th session amendments to the MARPOL Annex VI regulations to reduce harmful emissions from shipping. The main changes to MARPOL Annex VI will see a progressive reduction in sulphur oxide (SOx)-emissions from ships, with the global sulphur cap reduced initially from the current 4,5% to 3,5% effective from 1st January 2012; then progressively to 0,5%, effective from 1st January 2020, subject to a feasibility review to be completed no later than 2018. The limit applicable in Sulphur Emission Control Areas (SECA's) will be reduced from the current 1,5% to 1,0%, beginning on 1st July 2010; being further reduced to 0,1%, effective from 1st January 2015. The revised Annex VI will enter into force on 1st July 2010, under the tacit acceptance amendment procedure.

The Baltic Sea area was designated as a SECA in the protocol itself. Although the regulations entered into force on 19th May 2005, a provision allowed for a 12 month period for the date of entry into force before any limits in a SECA could be enforced. Therefore the Baltic Sea SECA came into effect on 19th May 2006. The North Sea and English Channel SOx Emission Control Area was adopted as an amendment to Annex VI in July 2005. It came into effect on 22nd November 2007. Until today these are the only designated Emission Control Areas.

Since the adoption of the new MARPOL Annex VI regulations for the prevention of air pollution from ships, a number of studies have been carried out in order to examine the impact of the new regulations on maritime and land transport as well as on the environment. The Finish Ministry of Transport and Communications has commissioned a study on how the IMO decision will effect the freight costs in Finland. Furthermore the Swedish Maritime Administration has published a study on the consequences of the new IMO marine fuel sulphur regulations. Additionally the Danish Ministry of the Environment published a report on ship emission and air pollution in Denmark considering inter alia the emission reduction by the MARPOL Annex VI regulations in respect to sulphur dioxide from ship traffic.

Most of these analysis come to the conclusion that sulphur levels of 0,1% lead to a modal backshift in the Baltic Sea, forcing freight from seagoing vessels on the roads, since lorries will become more cost-effective. Taking these findings into account, the Association of German Seaport Operators additionally presumes a certain possibility that the new IMO sulphur regulations for SECA's will lead to a changed logistics flow in Europe, to other ports than those of the Baltic Sea in order to reduce the time of a seagoing vessel in the SECA. This could result in a major distortion of competition and – taking the possibility of a modal backshift from sea to road into account – have from an ecological point of view a major adverse effect on climate protection.

In order to further evaluate these impacts of the new IMO sulphur regulations on ports and shipping lines in the Baltic Sea, the Association of German Seaport Operators together with the German Shipowners Association and the German Federal Ministry of Transport are conducting an impact assessment of the new regulations on transportation costs and logistics flows which is envisaged to be published within the first half of 2010. Depending on the outcome of this research, the study might also analyse the feasibility of countermeasures to circumvent any possible adverse effects of the new sulphur regulations on the maritime trade in the Baltic Sea area.