Location, location, location

Custody Transfer Sampling as a means of taking a sample for bunker stem testing is not a new issue, but it is one that has struggled to gather support over the years. Gearbulk's Ivar Tønnesen offers his case for the CTS cause, urging shipowners to fight for where their fuel sample is taken.

Bunker quality has fast become a hot topic for the tanker industry, spurred on by the recent contamination scares in Singapore. Whereas before ship operators believed that paying for bunkers automatically meant getting bunkers, there is now a growing realisation that this is not always the case.As a result, the use of sampling and testing is growing daily, but there remains one cloudy issue: where to take that sample.

CTS, which stipulates that both the bunker buyer and the seller take a joint bunker fuel sample at the receiving vessel's manifold, is already common practice in Singapore, but has been slow in gaining support from the rest of the industry.

Ivar Tønnesen, bunker manager at UK-based Gearbulk and former International Bunker Industry Association chairman, has taken the opportunity to bang the drum for CTS to become the industry standard.

"It's been dormant for a long time, but the problems in Singapore brought custody transfer sampling to the forefront again. Personally I think that old habits die hard and sellers' terms of sale still do not stipulate where the sample should be taken." He believes that it makes sense to take the sample where the buyer takes custody and therefore risk of the goods.

"The funny thing is if you talk to suppliers, many of them say they do not have a problem with CTS. Looking at the whole scenario, suppliers need to get rid of product just as much as I have to buy it, so the buyer should use their clout. It's all down to attitude."

At the moment, more often than not the sample ends up being taken on the barge, crucially before the buyer has actually received the fuel. Taking samples on the barge leaves room for dishonest suppliers to tamper with the sample before delivery, lulling the buyer into a false sense of security.

While the recently launched Standard Bunker Contract - a follow up to BIMCO's Fuelcon contract - does not specifically pinpoint the manifold as the point of testing, Tønnesen believes this is a good springboard from which to make demands to include CTS in the terms and conditions.

In his eyes CTS is cost-effective, with each sample taken costing "about a penny or even less per tonne delivered" and he believes that concerns over witnessing the sample-taking process are unfounded, saying that once the hose and sampler are connected they are tamper proof.

Det Norske Veritas Petroleum Services (DNVPS) started the CTS ball rolling back in 1988, with ExxonMobil and the Singapore Maritime and Port Authority (MPA) joining the cause earlier this decade. Singapore MPA revised its standard code of practice to include CTS as the norm in 2001. But despite this progress, Tønnesen feels that shipowners themselves should be more demanding still.

"A shipowner can spend hundreds of thousands of dollars on a bunker stem and yet pays little attention to it. With any other consumer good this would not be the case," he says. "I've been pushing for CTS for years, but I understand that if you want to revolutionise the world you cannot do it overnight or else everyone screams and shouts stop. If you do it little by little you get results."

He believes that if and when BIMCO and the various port state controls adopt the system the bunker industry will pass a "major hurdle". "The point here is that CTS is

already in use and has proved its effectiveness. Now the pressure will build on suppliers to adopt CTS."