

## Coming together

### **The harmonisation of CDI and SIRE is making good progress, but will it really solve the problem of multiple inspections?**

In the year 2000, the International Maritime Organisation's (IMO) secretary-general, William O'Neil, convened a meeting of industry associations to discuss the subject of multiple inspections. What with most ships having to undergo an average of 20 inspections a year and the alarming proliferation of commercial inspections in the wake of the Erika incident, it had become clear that the shipping industry needed to make a concerted effort to reduce the number of multiple inspections taking place. The establishment of the Oil Companies' International Marine Forum's (OCIMF) Ship Inspection Reporting System (SIRE) for oil tankers in 1993 and the Chemical Distribution Institute's (CDI) parallel inspection regime for chemical tankers in 1994 were, in fact, attempts to achieve just this aim. While the original vision of one inspection report per ship to be commonly shared by a pool of charterers did not come to fruition, progress in the right direction has certainly been made. According to John Hughes, director of OCIMF, the number of inspection reports requested as opposed to that of those submitted continues to rise. For instance, in the period from April 2001 to March 2002, 10,103 SIRE reports were submitted, while 14,886 were requested, meaning that there were nearly 5,000 duplicate inspections which did not take place. According to CDI's director, Martin Whittle, the Institute has succeeded in eliminating duplicates, too, with 1,119 inspections undertaken and 3,186 reports accessed.

But there is no doubt that more could be done to further reduce the number of multiple inspections. It is hoped that the proposed harmonisation of SIRE and CDI will achieve this aim, although Martin Whittle of CDI and a host of others are quick to point out that what is really at stake is not the efficacy of any one ship vetting scheme, but the restoration of trust in the industry between the oil and chemical companies themselves and between charterers and owners.

#### **Three steps forward**

Harmonisation between SIRE and CDI will be a long process, involving much discussion and ultimately, compromise. However, OCIMF and CDI recently came forward and announced that they had taken three major steps towards harmonisation: the harmonisation of their Vessel Particulars Questionnaires (VPQs); the holding of joint seminars for their inspectors; and the updating of the software systems used by each organisation, with an eye towards making them more compatible, i.e. more capable of easily exchanging information.

"The harmonised VPQ is a very clever piece of software," says Hughes. "It is currently undergoing tests with some of our members and should be rolled out within a month or so."

According to Whittle, CDI is ready to run with the harmonised VPQ and has been for some time now. "We implemented the harmonised VPQ in the year 2000, and at the same time we introduced all the software we needed to support the communications system," he says. CDI is now waiting for OCIMF to finish its internal trials and to "open up the communications channel".

Both Whittle and Hughes aver that the system will soon be ready and available to OCIMF and CDI members.

The first of the inspector training seminars to be jointly held by OCIMF and CDI will take place in the third or fourth quarter of this year. According to Whittle this represents "a huge step forward". He emphasises that candidates will continue to be separately trained, examined and accredited by CDI or SIRE, but that the yearly 'refresher' seminars for existing inspectors, designed to bring them up to speed on

new developments within the industry regarding regulations and changes in inspection reports, will now be jointly held, and that this is what is meant by 'joint training seminar'.

"There are standard topics that both CDI and ourselves always cover, very much along the lines of current issues in terms of legislative change, inspection issues that are emerging at the moment, any particular problems with inspectors and inspections in any particular part of the world," says Hughes. "Both organisations have virtually identical challenges, and we thought that it didn't make a great deal of sense for an individual OCIMF member to put together a conference for just his SIRE inspectors, when it could all be done together."

The issue of enhancing software compatibility is essentially one of fostering the eventual harmonisation of the actual inspection reports, although it is unclear whether or not this process will indeed result in a single, universal report. "Focusing on harmonising the two inspection reports is a much longer term project," says Whittle. "The ideal scenario would be for an inspection report to be like the VPQ - the shipping industry would only have one inspection report - so whether an inspector is coming from SIRE or CDI, the ship's crew knows what is required."

### **One step back?**

While harmonisation is good news for chemical tanker operators, the fact remains that the numbers do not bear out the idea that somehow harmonisation will bring about a drastic drop in the number of inspections oil, chemical and product tankers will have to undergo over the course of a year.

"If anyone believes that harmonising CDI and SIRE will reduce the number of inspections then they need to go away and think again," says Whittle, "because the presence of two systems is not the reason for all the multiple inspections."

While the Erika incident contributed to a renewed focus on commercial vetting inspections, the fact remains that charterers are not the only party interested in the state of the ship - classification societies, P&I clubs, flag states and port state control (PSC) authorities also have a claim. The last of these, PSC, actually has free access to both SIRE and CDI but rarely, if ever, takes up this option.

According to Whittle, only three CDI reports are accessed by PSC authorities per month, while Hughes states that out of a monthly average of 1,200 SIRE reports withdrawn, only two are requested by PSC. "When we talk about reducing inspections, there is an opportunity being missed here. Port state control can withdraw those reports free of charge, whereas even OCIMF members must pay for them," he says.

Janet Strode, general manager of the International Parcel Tankers Association (IPTA), does not believe that there has been any significant improvement since William O'Neil's call for action two years ago, although it is clear that the oil majors are now accessing each other's reports more often than they used to do. "We welcome the cooperation between CDI and SIRE," says Strode, "but even if a single system is adopted, it will make no difference unless the charterers commit to it."

Strode believes that there is still a lack of commitment to SIRE and CDI from the charterers, most of whom continue to prefer receiving reports from their own inspectors rather than accepting a colleague's ship inspection report.

Strode puts this lack of trust down to the culture of blame that has sprung up in the shipping industry in the wake of incidents such as the Erika sinking. From her point of view, and that of the owners she represents, the problem has become compounded by the fact that charterer approvals have in some cases taken on a heightened significance, above and beyond their utility as an indication of the suitability of a particular vessel; for instance, having approvals from all of the oil majors is thought to constitute a competitive advantage in some quarters of the industry.

According to Strode, the issue of ship vetting inspections was taken up at the last meeting of the Maritime Safety Committee (MSC 75) at IMO. The overall feeling,

from those representing the tanker owning and operating sector, was that there had been very little improvement over the past two years. Although most in the industry agree that there is a problem, there do not appear to be any clear-cut solutions. The harmonisation of CDI and SIRE is certainly a step in the right direction, but it will be exceedingly difficult to alter the culture of blame which is fundamentally responsible for the proliferation of tanker inspections.