

EMSA prepares to leave the stocks

The creation of the European Maritime Safety Agency is an example of one of a wide reaching, legislative measure taken in the aftermath of a major maritime incident, said EMSA's newly installed executive director Willem de Ruiter, speaking at Norshipping

The European Maritime Safety Agency (EMSA) was created in the wake of the tanker Erika sinking off the coast of France just a couple of years ago. Born out of public concern and the need by politicians to be seen to be effectively handling local community concerns, the Europe-wide EMSA will officially start its work this September.

Speaking at the Norshipping conference held in June in Oslo, its executive director Willem de Ruiter said that EMSA will not "be a huge organisation. Before the end of the year it is planned to have a staff of 40 people. Next year this number may double, due to the enlargement from 15 to 25 member states and because of certain new tasks that will be entrusted to EMSA."

Non-EU members Norway and Iceland will also participate in the work of EMSA, he said.

EMSA is being entrusted with three tasks focussing on safety and pollution prevention:

- to carry out on behalf of the European Commission certain technical tasks such as the assessment of EU recognised classification societies and the operation of databases on marine equipment.
- to give technical advice to the commission on matters related to future community legislation, and
- to organise technical co-operation between Member States' administrations on all matters concerning a proper application of the EU's maritime safety rules.

"The last task is perhaps the most important," said Mr de Ruiter, and was demonstrated by the response of the European regulators following the sinking of the Prestige," he added.

Within weeks of the November sinking of the hapless vessel off the coast of Spain, the European Commission presented a proposal for Europe-wide regulation.

This was accepted on March 27 and came into force on July 1. It stipulated that single hull tankers carrying heavy fuel oil were to be banned from the EU ports and secondly, the timetable to phase out single hull tankers would be accelerated.

At the same time, IMO discussions will start over an EU proposal to extend the strict rules on a global level.

Other lessons learnt from the Prestige include the serious need to improve standards of maritime accident investigations. "It is now six months since the accident happened and if you look at the available reports, the outcome is rather poor," said Mr de Ruiter.

"In this field EMSA has a role to play. EMSA could bring together the experts of all the parties involved, from coastal states, flag states, salvage companies, the class society and owner - not with the intention of blaming each other, but with the clear goal of analysing the causes and learning lessons for the future."

Mr de Ruiter also highlighted the thorny issue of compensation packages being made available to victims of oil spills. "At this moment, a detailed estimation of the total damage caused by the Prestige incident is not yet available. But we can safely assume that the total damage is much bigger than the Euro200m available through the International Oil Pollution Compensation Fund.

Already, after the Erika incident in December 2000, the European Commission stated that the fund limit should be raised from Euro200m to Euro1bn."

Other key issues for EMSA will include the "improved application" of the EC's safety rules by in Port State Control and through class surveys.

The agency is also concerned about the human element of shipping and available training for seafarers. EMSA is now being asked to audit the quality of educational systems in labour providing countries such as the Philippines and India.

However, Mr de Ruiter believes that there is no need for large amounts of new legislation. "Apart from the new proposals which have already been tabled, the emphasis has to be on proper application of the rules that have been adopted."

Also, Mr de Ruiter said: "EMSA will set up its own operational department to combat oil pollution. It is a big task that will require substantial means; the necessary proposals are currently being prepared by the Commission, he said. EMSA should make a start with this new task next year."