

EMSA chief floats EU concerns

Repercussions from the Prestige and Erika sinkings off the western European coast continue to reverberate around the tanker industry at all levels. Focus has been placed on safety in all its forms, and transparency is a key topic for discussion. Rafts of new Europe-wide measures are due to be put in place this July; many are unpopular with the tanker operating community.

A number of specific proposals may be loosened, but not many. Some 40m dwt pre-MARPOL tankers will be banned from European waters by 2005, and the final phase of banning tankers aged 22 years, (amounting to 70m dwt) will be bought forward to 2010 from 2015.

Speaking at the Tanker Operator conference just days before taking up his powerful new role as executive director of the European Maritime Safety Agency (EMSA), Willem de Ruyter brought gloomy news to the delegates. Assessing the political reaction in the EU following the two incidents, he warned: "Tanker operators have few friends in high places when there is oil on the beach".

Denying that EU actions in the wake of these two accidents weakened the authority of the International Maritime Organisation, Mr de Ruyter said that the EU's actions had been, "born out of an exceptional political crisis.

"For a period of time, we will have a regional regime. There is growing uneasiness in the EU among the public - concern over whether the IMO takes efficient care of the maritime environment, concern that it is industry driven and puts the marine environment second."

He also said that that IMO could never enact legislation as quickly as the EU is currently doing, due to lack of ratification of existing agreements and conventions. But the EU's unilateral action did mean the beginning of the end of the IMO. "Look at the work going on in the USA now and post-Exxon Valdez and OPA '90. It did not mean the end of the IMO."

Mr de Ruyter did suggest, "relatively minor parts of the proposals have the potential to be watered down. The ban on single hulled tankers sized 600 dwt and above might be relaxed for bunker barges operating within port limits for a grace period of two years to allow replacements to be commissioned".

Also the definition of heavy oil, currently set at 30 deg API, may be revised with the number being lowered.

But whatever happens, said Mr de Ruyter, it is the tanker operator who will eventually pay for the clean up of spills. This contentious issue struck a chord with much of the conference attendees.

EMSA is being launched this month with a staff of 50, but this will increase to around 100 within a year, said Mr de Ruyter. Its role is likely to be to play an active role in clean-up operations and may extend to vessel and hardware management."