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United Nations agency approves measure to reduce West Coast ship emissions

Maritime trade group says action is a bold step toward cleaner air

The International Maritime Organization (IMO), a United Nations agency, approved a measure at its meeting in London this week requiring ships to reduce air emissions by burning much cleaner fuel when transiting the coasts of the U.S. and Canada. For ships on the west coast, the new requirements apply to all ships within 200 miles of shore.

The approval of the U.S./Canada Emission Control Area (ECA) has been strongly supported by the international maritime industry even though there are significant logistical, cost and competitiveness challenges. The Pacific Merchant Shipping Association (PMSA) supported Assembly Joint Resolution No. 24, authored by Assembly Member Bonnie Lowenthal, urging approval of the ECA that passed the California Legislature by a vote of 62 to 6 with 55 co-authors.

These standards, when fully implemented, will reduce emission of sulfur content in marine fuels by 98%, resulting in a reduction of particulates by 85%. In addition to cleaning up the fuel used by vessels, the regulations also impose requirements for cleaner engines on new vessels that will reduce nitrogen oxides by 80%.

“This action will result in cleaner air for people and a level playing field for industry,” said John McLaurin, president of the PMSA, which represents major ship and shore-side terminal operators in California and Washington.

“Leading companies in our industry have already made voluntary and dramatic improvements in their environmental performance,” McLaurin said. “This action by the IMO will ensure that there is a level playing field for all shipping companies around the world to implement these aggressive international standards.”

“The IMO’s decision is also important because it sets a standard that must be implemented by all vessels, regardless of what flag they fly, that come within 200 nautical miles of the U.S. and Canada, including the Hawaiian Islands – and hopefully ends the trend where a patchwork of different standards was emerging as a result of states, districts and even cities considering their own standards.”

IMO is the United Nations agency that develops and adopts global regulations on safety, security and the prevention and control of marine pollution from ships. IMO's 169 governments from around the world oversee an international fleet of some 60,000 ships.

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