

IMO: Reducing global emissions from shipping

Although emissions from international aviation and shipping were not included in the Paris Agreement on climate change, separate emission negotiations have been under way in these sectors. When the Marine Environment Protection Committee (MEPC) – a body of the International Maritime Organization – met in London in October 2016 for its 70th session, its agenda featured two items concerning air pollution from ships. While the MEPC took a clear step towards cutting sulphur emissions, progress on curbing global greenhouse gas emissions has been slower.

Sulphur emissions from ships

The International Maritime Organization ([IMO](#)), a specialised United Nations agency which regulates global shipping, set limits for sulphur oxides and other air pollutants from ship exhaust gas in [1997](#) and tightened them in 2008, in light of technological improvements. These revised rules lowered the limit for sulphur content from 3.5 % to 0.5 % and also designated some sea areas as 'emission control areas' ([ECAs](#)) with even stricter limits (0.1 %). However, as reducing sulphur [requires](#) using cleaner fuels or installing an exhaust scrubber, and neither option was widely available in 2008, the starting date (2020) was subject to a feasibility review.

Thus, the MEPC was to determine whether enough low sulphur fuel would be available by 2020. [Two studies](#) were presented at its October meeting: one commissioned by the IMO confirmed that sufficient clean fuel will be available, while one put forward by the industry claimed the opposite. In addition, another [study](#) on health impacts affirmed that by starting in 2020, as opposed to 2025, some 200 000 premature deaths related to toxic fumes could be prevented, mostly in the developing world. Despite some (non-EU) opposition, the [MEPC](#) upheld 2020 as the starting date and the implementation of the new rules will be discussed in 2017.

Shipping and greenhouse gas emissions

The MEPC 70th [session](#) took place on 24-28 October 2016, shortly after the EU had ratified the 2015 [Paris Agreement](#) and the International Civil Aviation Organization (ICAO) [agreed](#) on a [global market-based measure](#) to offset the increase of greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions from international aviation. This raised expectations that the IMO would wish to ensure that shipping also contributes its fair share to international emission-reducing efforts. Indeed, shipping's GHG emissions, which in 2012 accounted for about [2.5 %](#) of global GHG emissions, are exempt both from international ([UNFCCC](#)) and [EU climate targets](#). If left unchecked, they are expected to increase by 50-250 % by 2050, depending on economic and energy developments.

The IMO argues that, since 2011, shipping has been the only industry to have in place global and legally binding [energy-efficiency measures](#). These measures, however, limit emissions' increase but do not reduce their volume. Moreover, the main measure applies to new ships only. In addition, later studies suggested that the targeted values were set [too low](#), with many new ships in 2014 exceeding even 2025 targets.

When proposals to change the [stringency levels](#) were reviewed at the MEPC meeting, most IMO member states wanted to bring the agreed 2025 standard forward to 2022. Despite this, the MEPC decided to postpone the decision until after a review in 2017. Instead, it decided only to [oblige](#) ships above 5 000 gross tonnes to collect data on fuel consumption, and indicated that an initial GHG strategy could be adopted in 2018.

EU position and outlook

The strict sulphur limits are already transposed into EU [legislation](#). As for curbing GHG emissions, the European Commission set out a three-step plan and, as a first step, introduced the [monitoring](#) of CO₂ emissions from large ships calling in EU ports from 2018. However, further steps (setting of reduction targets and applying a market-based measure) [depend](#) on developments in the IMO. [Committed](#) to keeping global warming below 2°C, the EU supports international emissions-reducing efforts and is advancing towards [low-emission mobility](#).

