

USCG limits extensions for ballast water systems

Changes in US Coast Guard policy may see operators struggle to align compliance between US and IMO regulations, says Evon Li, Senior Engineer, Advisory Services, ABS. Regulations governing the discharge of ballast water in the United States and globally have solidified for ship owners who are trying to do their part to limit the spread of invasive aquatic species.

While the IMO continues to allow limited delays in the enforcement of its Ballast Water Management Convention, the enforcement of the US Coast Guard's (USCG) policy has drawn nearer.

Until recently, ship owners trading in U.S. waters could defer the installation of a Ballast Water Management System (BWMS) on existing vessels by obtaining an extension from the USCG: Because there was an insufficient availability of USCG-approved systems, vessels scheduled for drydocking in 2016 or 2017 were allowed to delay installation until the next scheduled drydock in five years' time.

However, in a March circular from the USCG, ship owners were told they could no longer rely on these extensions. The USCG indicated the type approved BWM systems are able to cover nearly all classes of vessels and are compatible with a broad range of operational requirements.

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In some cases, the deadline for installation has been reduced to a year or less from the date of an upcoming drydock, unless extraordinary circumstances justify an extension. For vessels with a drydock scheduled in 2018, the extension period has been reduced to 30 months from five years.

These changes could become problematic for ship owners and operators of 'mid-life' vessels who, for commercial reasons, are trying to align USCG compliance with the later IMO D-2 compliance dates.

Vessels drydocked in 2016 — including those with extensions to drydock through 2018 — are in a better position to align the U.S. and IMO compliance dates; however, vessels with drydocking scheduled from 2019 onwards are unlikely to be able to align the two; they would need to opt for an earlier installation of a BWMS or use another compliance method allowed by the USCG.

In addition to selecting the right system, owners are faced with making decisions on their retrofit plans, which may have a cascading impact on compliance timelines, extension requests, crew

training and other steps to meet the new requirements.

To help ship owners understand the options and obligations for compliance with IMO and USCG regulations, ABS is offering a BWMS Technology Evaluation service to support them with the transition, and in finding the system that is most suitable for specific vessels.

The service utilizes an interactive, multi-phase process with an extensive database of BWMS technologies, design capabilities/limitations, installation requirements, power requirements, operating considerations and restrictions on equipment use. It also provides support for requesting USCG extensions.

The new limits on USCG extensions for installation of a BWMS apply to Canadian vessels with ballast tanks operating in U.S. territorial waters (12 nautical miles from the baseline) on any of its coasts, and to ships entering U.S. waters from outside the US EEZ and then entering the Great Lakes via the St. Lawrence Seaway system. The regulations do not apply to vessels operating solely within the Great Lakes.

