

Sea pollution: Prestige accident, improving safety at sea

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The committee adopted the own-initiative report by Dirk STERCKX (ELDR, B) on improving safety at sea in the wake of the Prestige oil tanker disaster off the coast of Galicia in November 2002. The report looked at ways of improving maritime safety at both European and international level and went on to consider the economic, social, environmental and fisheries aspects. MEPs called for a range of measures at European level to prevent another Prestige-style accident in Community waters. They called on the Member States to cooperate with the European Maritime Safety Agency (EMSA) in ensuring timely and full compliance with national emergency planning arrangements and the designation of safe havens for vessels in distress. The Commission, for its part, was urged to clarify the concept of safe areas, allocate them appropriate equipment and financial resources and speed up the process of establishing a Community fleet of pollution-fighting ships. Other recommendations included the establishment of a European coastguard service, more stringent surveillance, the prosecution of illegal discharging from vessels, the enforcement of specific shipping routes and the allocation of emergency moorings and ports. Moreover, vessels at greatest risk should be inspected more frequently and Member States should increase the number of inspectors. In addition, the reporting requirements governing pilots should include vessels in transit off the European coast. MEPs also called for special zones to be established for ecologically sensitive and navigationally difficult areas in the Baltic. In addition, the Member States were urged to control and monitor closely the traffic of vessels ferrying dangerous and polluting goods within 200 miles of their coastline. However, the committee expressed concern at decisions taken by some Member States to ban such vessels from the 200-mile zone off their coast. It pointed out that these vessels would then be forced to navigate at too great a distance from the coast and would thereby run unacceptable risks to their crews and the environment if the vessel were to get into difficulties. The committee also regretted the fact that the captain of the Prestige, Captain Mangouras, had been treated as a criminal although he was not responsible for the damage sustained by his vessel. The Spanish judicial authorities were asked to release him from house arrest. Concern was voiced at the increased criminalisation of seafarers and the damage this does to the image of seafaring as a career. At international level, the committee wanted the Union to accede to the IMO and the Commission to be given a mandate to negotiate with the IMO on behalf of the EU. It called on the Commission and Member States to make every effort to reach agreement with the IMO on phasing out single-hulled tankers worldwide. It also wanted to see stricter legislation and controls on flags of convenience in the transport of dangerous cargo by sea. Other points raised in the report included: - a call for the "polluter pays" principle to be fully enforced at sea by means of a criminal-liability scheme; - the need for Community action in the tourism, fisheries and shellfish sectors which are so crucial to the economies of the areas affected by environmental disasters; - the designation of sensitive sea fishing areas because of the richness of their fish and shellfish resources and the population's heavy dependence on these resources; - a recommendation that the entire EU coastline should be covered by an EU Emergency Action Plan and that an EU civil defence force should be set up to intervene in the event of an environmental disaster; - the need for proper training of seafarers and a thorough overhaul of international maritime law to deal with such matters as health and safety at work and the requirements of modern maritime transport.