

Hazmat shippers key to avoiding disaster

April 18, 2007

PHOENIX -- The shipment of hazardous cargoes often causes delays in the loading of containers and, in extreme cases, has resulted in tragedies at sea, but carriers say it doesn't have to be that way.

If shippers filed timely documentation and complied with national and international regulations for the classification, marking and packing of dangerous cargoes, delays would be minimal and disasters involving hazardous cargoes would be a thing of the past.

"Hazmat can be, but doesn't have to be, a ticking time bomb," said George P. Cate, area manager for marine operations and hazardous cargoes at NYK Line North America. Cate addressed the annual conference of the National Customs Brokers and Forwarders Association Tuesday.

Dangerous goods that are explosive or have a low flashpoint are highly regulated. In the United States, the regulation known as 49 CFR describes in detail how hazardous cargoes should be classified, packed into containers and stowed on vessels. The International Maritime Organization's dangerous goods code regulates these cargoes at the international level, Cate said.

The shipment of hazardous cargoes by sea is a commonplace occurrence. NACA Logistics Group performs an average of 120 audits a day involving dangerous goods, said Eric Fischer, hazardous materials manager at Vanguard Logistics Services, a unit of NACA Logistics USA.

The problem that carriers and cargo consolidators face is that shippers often file inaccurate or incomplete documentation on hazmat shipments, and they frequently disregard regulations involving the use of placards to identify the cargoes as being hazardous.

Fischer said that about 25 percent of the 120 hazmat shipments NACA handles each day have some type of error, and that company representatives spend a great deal of time on the phone seeking the correct information.

Cate said NYK Line will not load a container containing hazardous cargoes on a vessel unless the documentation is accurate and complete.

Consolidated containers can be especially troublesome because they hold shipments from multiple shippers. Rather than hold up the entire container and inconvenience shippers who have filed correct and timely documentation, NACA will put a hold only on the shipper that failed to comply with the regulations. Fisher said.

Every participant in the logistics chain, including the shipper, trucker, freight forwarder, consolidator and ocean carrier, has a responsibility to look for problems in the handling of hazardous shipments even if they did not cause the problem, Fischer said.

In fact, the Department of Transportation has fined companies simply for passing on through the supply chain shipments that did not comply with the hazardous cargo regulations, he said.

The JOURNAL of COMMERCE ONLINE
April 18, 2007



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