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Lintec finds more fuel samples over 1.50% limit

Testing agency claims that over 16% of samples collected broke new Seca rules.

Lintec, a leading maritime fuel testing agency, claims that an increasing percentage of bunker fuel samples tested in the last quarter of 2007 were greater than 1.50% sulphur.

In August last year the second Sulphur Emission Control Area, which requires ships to burn fuel at a maximum 1.50% sulphur content, entered into force covering the North Sea and English Channel.

According to Lintec general manager Geoff Jones just over 16% of the samples tested by the UK based company in the fourth quarter last year were greater than 1.50%, compared with 14% in the previous quarter. Of this total, Mr Jones added that just over 24% of fuel oil samples received by Lintec in the fourth quarter were low sulphur compared with 20% in the previous quarter.

In total, Lintec received nearly 30,000 samples to be tested direct from vessels last year, an increase of just over 5,000 from a year earlier.

"This indicates that the Annex VI Seca has had an influence over frequency of sampling and the fact that samples are still found to be over the 1.50% limit on a regular basis," Mr Jones told Lloyd's List. However, not everyone in the industry agrees that the 16% of the samples which tested above 1.50% should be considered as non compliant.

The samples being tested to be over 1.50% brings into question the problem of repeatability and reproducibility in testing samples. That being, no same sample will produce the same result. As a result, Mr Jones added that suppliers are starting to recognise that "they need to produce material at about the 1.42% level for the sample to be guaranteed to be within 1.5%." "We are seeing now that if it is in the range of, say, 1.50% - 1.58%, that the chances are the bunker delivery note will report 1.5%," added Mr Jones.

However, Total Marine Fuels general manager David Bleasdale added that he does not agree that a fuel sample should be supplied at 1.42% in order to be within 1.5%. "I do not agree with that, I think that what should happen is that the IMO should identify the ISO 8217 and the test method and within that test method the parameters, such as repeatability and reproducibility. Therefore, if the test is within these parameters it should be on-spec," said Mr Bleasdale. "In the cargo market if a fuel is supplied within 1.52% - 1.54% and is within the repeatability and reproducibility it is no claim, it is on-spec." Mr Jones raised further questions regarding poor fuel quality, in particular ignition problems and high levels of hydrogen sulphide. He warned that current high prices for bunker fuel, which topped \$500 per tonne last year in Rotterdam, are a major factor linking to poor quality fuel. "I think high prices are definitely a factor, if a few dollars per tonne can be saved I think we are seeing fuel purchasers going for it," said Mr Jones. "Obviously there is the possibility of quality problems with this, one of which being ignition and combustion problems." Mr Jones noted that he has seen fuel quality problems arise with certain independent suppliers, however he declined to specify the companies.

A source, who declined to be named, told Lloyd's List he believed that the majority of the samples in question were originating from Rotterdam. Mr Jones warned: "Although there is always going to be a problem with the FTA test [for ignition and combustion], due to the high cost of the equipment and test, I think we need something more in ISO 8217 for combustion testing as this is going to be a big issue. "The other thing we have seen a lot of recently is a lot of hydrogen sulphides in the fuels." This can cause serious health and safety concerns to the crew if the gases are inhaled. "It is a difficult one, I know ISO 8217 talked about it [hydrogen sulphides] but it wasn't put in the 2005 version," he said. "But the health and safety problems of this is an issue and it needs to be looked at."

