

Autonomous ships: MASS – a “pearl” of an opportunity

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Legal firm HFW has updated clients on the work it has been doing on Maritime Autonomous Surface Ships (MASS) since its last report in December 2018.

At SMIT Managing Marine Emergencies Course in April 2019, HFW delivered a one-day workshop focusing on the salvage of an autonomous cargo vessel which had been involved in a collision whilst sailing into a port on the South Coast of the UK. HFW said that some interesting points emerged during the course, in particular, whether a person who was not the Master of an autonomous vessel (such as an electrical engineer or technician) could bind the cargo interests to the terms of a Lloyds Open Form “No Cure – No Pay” salvage contract.

At NOR Shipping 2019 a keynote presentation was given by Oscar Levander at the Ship Autonomy and Sustainability Summit. Levander, head of marine innovation at Kongsberg Maritime Finland, said that there were significant opportunities for ship owners who were prepared to take the lead with autonomy, as they were likely to have a significant competitive advantage in the market.

Levander said that autonomy was best-suited to smaller vessel types, where the return on investment was relatively short, a view with which HFW said it agreed, “at least in the short and medium term”.

Levander went on to say that he thought that nearly one third of the world's fleet could switch to unmanned operations, but that there was a particularly good case for the switch being made for cargo vessels moving non-hazardous cargoes, ferries, tugs and other smaller units in the confines of the port, as well as on inland waterways.

Other recent MASS developments worldwide were:

May 7th: the USV Maxlimer completed the first commercial crossing of the North Sea by a MASS. The 12-metre vessel arrived in Oostende with a 5kg cargo of oysters, a fraction of its maximum payload of 2.5 tonnes. The mission was designed to showcase SEA_KIT's unmanned navigation capabilities through GPS and satellite communication, including marine traffic avoidance in one of the world's busiest shipping routes. The mission was part of the preparations for the USV Maxlimer to attempt the world's first transatlantic crossing without a crew from Canada to the South Coast of the UK. The vessel will

conduct deep sea surveys en route and will be monitored by a control station in the UK.

The voyage is expected to take about 35 days.

The IMO Maritime Safety Committee (MSC) held its 101st session from June 5th to June 14th (MSC 101) and considered a status report on the Regulatory Scoping Exercise (RSE). The aim of the RSE is to determine how MASS might be addressed in IMO instruments by reviewing existing requirements and developing a roadmap as to how existing IMO instruments may be adapted to accommodate MASS in the future. An intersessional working group (IWG) on MASS will take place during September 2nd to September 6th. It will consider reports of Administrations responsible for developing assessments and addressing comments on certain IMO instruments. The RSE is currently expected to conclude in 2020.

The International Organization for Standardization (ISO) is developing an ISO Standard for MASS terminology for use in MASS; a submission is expected at MSC 102.

MSC 101 approved a set of Interim Guidelines for MASS trials, which are very much high level and goal-based. These are in development and it is intended that there will be a single document for Administrations, industry and other relevant stakeholders.

HFW concluded that developments with MASS continued apace. "However, whether the successful voyage of USV Maxlimer with its cargo of oysters reflects the true cultivation of a pearl of an opportunity remains to be seen."