

Fire safety onboard ships are a continuous cause for concern: Gard

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Norway-based marine insurer and group club Gard has said that the list of unacceptable fire safety systems and arrangements observed during port state control inspections was long and, more worryingly, had not changed much from one year to another.

In April 2022 the US Coast Guard released its Port State Control (PSC) Annual Report 2021. Findings related to inadequate fire safety systems and arrangements on board visiting ships topped the PSC's list of causes for detainable deficiencies, as was the case most years, said Gard.

Some of the most common detainable fire safety deficiencies reported by the US PSC Officers (PSCO) during the past five years were:

- Fuel oil leaks, oil-soaked insulation/lagging, excessive amounts of oil in engine room bilges, quick-closing valves on fuel and lube oil tanks being disabled in the open position, etc. – all evidence of poor engine room maintenance and housekeeping procedures.
- Disconnected or inoperable fire detectors. There are even reports of smoke detectors covered with plastic bags, and standard battery-operated household smoke detectors being the only source for fire detection in the accommodation spaces.
- Breach of structural fire protection barriers, including defect fire doors, inoperable fire dampers, and damaged ventilation ducting.
- Inoperable fixed fire-extinguishing systems, e.g. due to a discharge valve being set in the wrong/closed position or spray nozzles that are clogged by dirt and debris. On one occasion, rags were found to have been stuffed into all of the sprinkler heads in a ship's paint store.
- Malfunctioning fire pumps, delivering less pressure or amounts of water than what is required, and fire hoses that are damaged or dry rotted.
- Portable fire extinguishers with little or no pressure in the cylinders.

Gard also noted that the frequency of ship fires was not improving.

According to the Nordic Association of Marine Insurer's (Cefor) Annual Report 2021, the frequency of most types of casualties were showing a downward trend, with the exception of fires.

Although cargo-related fires on board container vessels and car/Ro-Ro vessels had been a frequent topic of discussion in the industry in recent years, the majority of fires on board ships still originated in the engine room. Cefor identified that:

- The frequency of fires had hovered around the same average level for years. And, while the frequency of fires may be low compared to for example machinery or navigation related claims, fires tend to result in very costly claims because of their serious consequences.
- The highest fire frequency was seen on car/Ro-Ro, container, and passenger vessels, and these were often very expensive incidents.
- Fires on container vessels continued to increase in number, and the risk of fires in the cargo area of such vessels increases with the size of the vessel. However, the overall fire frequency for container vessels was also heavily impacted by engine room fires. In fact, the frequency of fires in the engine room of container vessels was almost three times higher than the frequency of fires in their cargo areas in 2020-2021.

Gard concluded by observing that major fires had arisen because of a failure to recognize potential fire hazards. But, above all, the best fire prevention was a well-trained crew. "Training and experience transfer between crew should aim to create a mutual understanding of all fire hazards present on board and their potential consequences. Remember, ordinary seafarers may have to deal with fire incidents that would challenge even the most experienced of fire-fighters."

<https://www.gard.no/web/updates/content/33539588/fire-safety-onboard-ships-a-continuous-cause-for-concern>