

Calling All ECDIS Stakeholders

The IMO is considering a phased programme to make the carriage of ECDIS compulsory. This could mean that certain vessels be required to carry ECDIS from as early as 2008. In my view, this is the key to resolving many of the outstanding issues with ECDIS, ranging from the limited number of official electronic charts, through incomplete training and awareness of ECDIS on the part of mariners, to large variations in pricing for both the charts and the equipment.

While the IHO continues to report ever-increasing rates of production for the official electronic charts relied upon by ECDIS there has never been a target date for required official electronic chart coverage. This in turn hampers Hydrographic Offices in their ability to turn to their governments for the necessary resources and support. At the same time, ship operators seem reluctant to invest in ECDIS unless the official charts are available and the rules for using ECDIS become clearer. The rules remain unclear because many Maritime Safety Administrations have been slow to provide flag-state guidance on the use of ECDIS, perhaps because its use under SOLAS Chapter V is not widespread. Finally, ECDIS manufacturers remain for their part reluctant to improve and update the current capabilities and reliability of their first-generation ECDIS until better sales can be assured. All in all: a vicious circle.

Setting a target date for compulsory carriage requirement for ECDIS would mean the IMO providing certainty for all parties involved. I am sure that as soon as it becomes clear that ECDIS is to become a compulsory requirement in ships everyone will be stirred into greater action. In September, the CHRIS (Committee on Hydrographic Requirements for Information Systems), the technical steering committee of the IHO, will meet in Rostock, Germany. This meeting will have a number of important strategic decisions to make about ECDIS. In particular, how the standards (S57 and S52) that govern ECDIS can be advanced to best include new developments and requirements recently approved by IMO and others, such as the requirement to include environmental and security zones on charts. What changes must be made to the existing standards? How can these new and important requirements be included in ECDIS without making major changes to the current equipment or software, or require the introduction of radically new standards? What are the options? How will any changes affect the stakeholders? These are all questions that must be answered.

An open forum will be held in Rostock on 6th and 7th September, in conjunction with the CHRIS meeting, to seek the opinions of ECDIS stakeholders on possible revisions to the standards and to discuss the issues and identify the impact. My view is that anyone who considers themselves a stakeholder in ECDIS should ensure that they are represented at this important meeting. ECDIS "stakeholders" include not just the HO's who make the charts but also the mariners, ship operators, national maritime administrations, data suppliers, equipment manufacturers and others who rely on or are in some way affected by ECDIS. For more information about the ECDIS Stakeholders Forum go to www.iho.shom.fr/MISC/Ind_intro.htm.