

Inland waterways under fire from Brussels

EU transport committee chair accuses industry of strong-arm tactics over passenger liability regime dispute, writes Justin Stares - Monday 23 April 2007

RESISTANCE by the inland waterway industry to European Union plans for a new insurance regime is “not noble”, said the chairman of the European Parliament transport committee.

The industry was seeking to prevent Brussels from extending an international passenger liability regime to inland waterway traffic for purely financial reasons without any consideration of passengers themselves, said committee chairman Paolo Costa.

During a seminar in the European parliament, the Italian MEP, parliamentary rapporteur for the proposed regulation, said the industry’s surprisingly strong lobbying campaign was “respectable but not noble”.

He continued: “Public opinion is not being defended. We are talking about a little annoyance for the inland waterways industry versus better protection for passengers.”

Stripping inland waterways out of the regulation would create a two-tier system, he said. “Why should passengers in the Black Sea be protected but passengers on the Danube not?”

Because there were few incidents involving ships on Europe’s rivers, premiums for passenger liability cover would be low, he argued.

Mr Costa’s criticism comes ahead of what is expected to be a knife-edge vote in the European parliament plenary this week.

In the parliament transport committee earlier this year, the industry managed to mobilise enough support to pass an amendment removing inland waterways from the scope of the proposal. But the amendment was annulled on a technicality.

There will be another amendment attempt in a plenary session.

Euro MPs sympathetic to the industry’s stance argue it will be difficult to raise the insurance cover required — around €300,000 (\$388,000) for each passenger.

The structure of the inland waterways sector is “fundamentally different” to sea navigation, they claim, adding that strict liability and higher limits are not necessary due to the low risks.

The regulation also seeks to extend international rules enshrined in the Athens Convention to domestic or “cabotage” traffic. According to Mr Costa this part of the proposal is “better accepted” by the industry.

The law would oblige carriers to take out “insurance or another financial security such as a guarantee”. It has also raised concerns in the council of ministers, the institution which represents national capitals.

Insurance industry contacts said the cost of additional liability cover was difficult to estimate and might not be available due to the requirement for schemes to be government-approved.

For this reason the shipowning industry has asked Brussels to conduct an impact assessment study before implementing the law.

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