

Barge industry closes liability lockgates

European Barge Union predicts voting victory today in battle to remove inland waterways from Erika 3 passenger law proposal, writes Justin Stares in Brussels - Wednesday 25 April 2007

Europe's barge industry is predicting victory in today's knife-edge vote on Brussels passenger liability regulation.

The European Barge Union says it has obtained the support of the European Parliament's largest political bloc, the European People's Party, which has promised to help push through an amendment removing inland waterways from the scope of the proposed law.

"The EPP is in favour of supporting the amendment," European Barge Union secretary general Theresia Hacksteiner told Lloyd's List. "We have been in deep discussions with the legislators."

The EBU has led a lobbying campaign designed to prevent Brussels from implementing the Athens Convention liability regime on the EU's rivers and canals.

It is arguing that EU legislation is not required because risks are much lower.

The union says there are also doubts that the insurance required would be available.

"We are talking about different cups of coffee," said Ms Hacksteiner.

"Maritime and inland waterways should not be covered by the same law."

The union succeeded in passing a similar amendment in the parliament's transport committee, though the vote was cancelled on a technicality. Ms Hacksteiner accused the parliament rapporteur, Italian MEP Paolo Costa, of "playing games" in order to keep the proposal unchanged.

Today's vote in the Strasbourg plenary is therefore the second attempt to get the amendment through.

While the barge industry was confident of victory, others were less certain. "I'm not sure they will back down from this proposal now," said one parliament watcher. Strasbourg voting patterns are notoriously unpredictable.

Increased liability cover for passengers was not necessary because those involved in incidents could simply swim to the river bank in most cases, said Ms Hacksteiner. It was also reported that in some countries increased cover would not be obtainable.

The International Group of P&I Clubs pointed out that many inland waterway operators already had insurance. The issue yesterday showed the first sign of breaking through into main stream news agenda.

"Forcing barges to apply the technical and insurance red tape supertankers use could sink Britain's barge holidays," said Timothy Kirkhope MEP, leader of the British Conservatives.

The shipping industry has accepted the principle of making the Athens Convention law in the EU, as well as extending it to domestic or 'cabotage' traffic, provided the insurance industry can provide cover and is given time to adapt to the new regime.

The regulation is one of five of the 'Erika 3' proposals voted on in plenary this week.

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