



SEMAPHORE

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Leading Maritime Academic Says Lack of Annex VI Action an Embarrassment

New Zealand's lack of action over air pollution from shipping is an international embarrassment. This is true of both the country's commitment to addressing global climate change and the safeguarding of local air quality. In particular, New Zealand has not yet signed up to Annex VI of the International Convention on the Prevention of Pollution from Ships (MARPOL).

Discussion around shipping and air pollution has been growing in recent years, and Annex VI itself dates back to 1997. In addition to rules improving ship engine efficiency, the agreement included a promise to reduce the maximum sulphur content of ships' fuel to 3.5 percent in 2012, and to 0.5 percent in 2020. Between 2006 and 2014 special emission control areas covering much of Northern Europe and North America entered into force, bringing sulphur content there down to just 0.1 percent.

Although 88 other countries are party to the Annex VI agreement, New Zealand remains a global outlier. The only other OECD countries in this position are Iceland, Israel and Mexico. The only other countries in the South Pacific Commission to ignore it are Fiji and the Solomon Islands. Australia ratified in 2007.

New Zealand's official position to date has been that we are too small to worry about air pollution from ships. But the assumption that other countries will look after this issue for us is unrealistic. Without laws implementing Annex VI, there is nothing to stop a ship's operator saving a significant amount of money by using cheaper bunker fuel on the New Zealand leg of a longer voyage. It is the inspections carried out in ports that provide the real "teeth" for international rules of this kind.

Not only does the current position underplay the human health concerns associated with sulphur dioxide emissions, it weakens New Zealand's international credibility.

Ongoing Annex VI meetings are being used by the International Maritime Organization (IMO) as the vehicle for discussions around greenhouse gas emissions from shipping more generally. New Zealand is participating in these IMO meetings, but risks being called out for hypocrisy.

It is hardly credible for New Zealand to argue for higher standards when it has not signed up to the widely accepted piece of international law currently governing the issue under discussion. And without signing up to Annex VI, we lack a vote at the IMO emission meetings.

There is also an economic risk to New Zealand if it remains outside Annex VI. Other countries have proposed regulating shipping emissions by way of financial mechanisms based on the distance a ship travels. New Zealand's geographic position makes us vulnerable to such an approach. We need a strong voice at the table to argue for solutions that target polluters, not isolated consumers in the Pacific.

The arguments for New Zealand's ratification of Annex VI are therefore not just principled ones associated with international obligations towards the climate. The move would have practical benefits, both in addressing the issue of clean air and in giving New Zealand more sway at the international level.

The growing number of cruise ship visits, and significant increases in ambient sulphur dioxide and particulate levels in the vicinity of ports, have highlighted the issue of air pollution from shipping in New Zealand. Just as New South Wales has been confronting the public health concerns of seaside residents, Ports of Auckland recently raised the prospect of requiring cruise ships to use shore-based electricity. Many cruise ships visiting our shores already have abatement technology on board that reduces their emissions—but they are not required to use it here.

The time has come for a New Zealand government response to the wider issue of shipping emissions, with the long overdue ratification of Annex VI. A waterfront stroll should entail fresh sea air, not sulphurous fumes.

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Mot Responds

Following Dr Bevan Marten's recently expressed criticisms of New Zealand's failure to sign up to Annex VI of the International Convention on the Prevention of Pollution from Ships (MARPOL), the Ministry of Transport was moved to issue a statement.

In late March, Ministry of Transport aviation and maritime general manager Nick Brown said his agency had begun work to assess whether New Zealand should become a signatory.

"We will be investigating the full implications for New Zealand, including the costs and benefits of signing up, as part of our 2017 work programme," he stated.

"We have started informal talks with shipping industry groups and stakeholders to help us scope the issues and options. We are at the early stages of planning our work, which will include looking at the costs and benefits of acceding to Annex VI, as well as engaging more formally with stakeholders.

"The Ministry will provide advice to the Government and Ministers will then make a decision.

"New Zealand has been an active and engaged member of the IMO since its establishment in 1948. Our involvement reflects the strong interest we have in ensuring effective international rules for safe and secure shipping, and protecting the marine environment against ship pollution."