



Contaminated bunkers hit Singapore again

The problem of contaminated bunkers has once again reared its ugly head in Singapore, after a spate of similar incidents in 2017 and 2018.

Reuters reported on 4 April 2022 that at least 34 vessels were identified as having received contaminated high-sulphur fuel oil (HSFO) in Singapore, with 14 of those reporting loss of power and other engine problems. By 6 May 2022, this had grown to 200 vessels stemmed with contaminated HSFO, 80 of which had suffered engine, fuel pump and performance issues, as reported by Tradewinds.

The Singapore marine regulator, the Maritime and Port Authority of Singapore (MPA), said that it was first notified on 14 March 2022, and immediately launched an investigation. It also immediately ordered a halt to the supply and prevented further bunkering of the affected batch of fuel, and informed all ships already supplied with the fuel to exercise caution when using it.

The MPA takes quality assurance seriously and investigates all cases of alleged bunker fuel contamination reported in the world's largest bunkering port. Initial reports suggested that although the affected batch of HSFO met standard ISO 8217 specifications, it was contaminated with up to 2,000 parts per million (ppm) of chlorinated hydrocarbons.

Subsequent MPA investigations involving forensic fingerprinting analysis of fuel samples taken from multiple sources revealed "*with reasonable certainty*" that the contamination was traced to HSFO loaded on board a tanker at Khor Fakkan in the United Arab Emirates. This contaminated HSFO was then shipped to Tanjong Pelepas in Malaysia for blending and was eventually delivered to storage tanks in Singapore from where Glencore and PetroChina supplied vessels in anchorage.

As to the culprit of the contamination, the MPA discovered high concentrations of the chlorinated organic compounds (COC) dichloroethane and tetrachloroethylene in the HSFO that was tested. Glencore's own investigation revealed some 15,000 ppm of COCs present in the HSFO that it tested. MPA's testing of the cargo samples taken from the tanker responsible for bringing the tainted HSFO from Khor Fakkan found concentrations of COCs as high as 21,000 ppm.



According to MPA, bunker fuel contamination caused by high concentration levels of COCs has not been reported in Singapore in the last two decades. The last episode of bunker fuel contamination in Singapore in 2017–2018 was caused primarily by polypropylene detected in heavy fuel oil.

A major issue with bunker fuel contamination episodes like these is that the ISO 8217 specifications do not require contaminants like COCs and polypropylene to be tested, as these contaminants do not form any part of the specifications of ISO 8217. Therefore, fuel contaminated by such agents is not usually detected until they have already been stemmed and are in the process of being consumed.

This poses grave problems for owners and charterers alike should the contaminated fuel end up affecting the performance of or, worse still, damaging ships' engines.

On the other hand, Singapore bunker suppliers do not guarantee that the fuel that they supply will be free of contaminants not specified in ISO 8217. Their only guarantee is that their fuel is supplied within the specifications and perimeters of ISO 8217. This raises the spectre of multiple, lengthy and costly litigation between owners/charterers and bunker suppliers, often involving P&I insurers on both sides.

Recognising this, the MPA and the Singapore Shipping Association are presently in talks with industry stakeholders on initiatives to strengthen the quality assurance of bunkers supplied in Singapore. One of these is the introduction of mandatory additional fuel quality checks and screening for contaminating chemicals not found in ISO 8217. To this end, a list of chemicals to be tested and their corresponding concentration limits are being drawn up by an industry expert group, which is expected to release its recommendations "*on an urgent basis*".

It is hoped that such initiatives will prevent or at least reduce incidents of bunker contamination in Singapore. As the world's foremost bunkering hub, initiatives taken by Singapore to improve bunker fuel quality assurance will significantly and positively impact the quality assurance of bunker fuel supplied worldwide. Presently, MPA is preparing a report to the International Maritime Organization to inform member states of the potential problems with COCs.

Owners and charterers should be aware that bunkers stemmed in Singapore are almost always subject to bunker suppliers' standard or general terms and conditions. These almost always provide for extremely tight contractual time bars of as little as seven days from the date of delivery to put suppliers on notice of any quality and/or quantity disputes, together with all the necessary details and supporting documentation. Owners and charterers should be made well aware of such terms which are ubiquitous amongst bunker suppliers in Singapore.

CJC's Singapore office is well placed to handle bunker contamination claims arising in Singapore and across Asia, and we have considerable experience assisting P&I clubs in this area.

For queries and further information, please speak to your usual contacts at CJC.

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