

A working group of the UN's International Maritime Organisation released an interim strategy on 6 April, which calls on international shipping to reduce total annual greenhouse gas emissions from 2008 levels by at least 50% by 2050.

The strategy will need to be finalised by 13 April at the Maritime Environment Protection Committee of the IMO but the issue remains uncertain as deep divisions prevail among the 173 IMO member states.

The MEPC is expected to adopt an initial strategy on the reduction of GHG emissions from ships, which is to set out the future vision for international shipping, the levels of ambition to reduce GHG emissions and guiding principles, the IMO said.

It should include possible short-, mid- and long-term further measures with possible timelines and their impacts on states, as well as identify barriers and supportive measures including capacity building, technical cooperation and R&D, it added.

Maritime emissions are especially problematic because most ships run on fuel oil, which is far more carbon intensive and contains more air pollutants, such as sulfur, than fuels used in road transport.

International shipping is not covered by the Paris Agreement, which is based on national commitments, although it has a carbon print the size of Germany.

Under pressure

The shipping industry is facing increasing pressure from climate campaigners, business representatives, the EU and small islands states in the Pacific to commit to the Paris agreement.

They support a 70-100% reduction by 2050 scenario, which they say is needed to align with the Paris Agreement.

As negotiations begin on 9 April, EU Transport Commissioner Violeta Bulc called for a "meaningful" greenhouse gas strategy from the IMO.

Nicholas Rock and Thor Maalouf of global law firm Reed Smith LLP recalled in a note the EU had made it clear last year it expects the IMO to introduce an ambitious target for emission reduction, alongside other measures in its 2018 strategy.

It threatened at the time to bring shipping within its emissions trading scheme unless the IMO sets a target for reduction of greenhouse gas emissions.

Strongest possible deal

David Paul, environment minister of the Marshall Islands, said they will not back any deal that is not in line with the Paris agreement target.

The Marshall Islands host the world's second-largest shipping registry, which gives the country a strong voice within the negotiations.

Determined minority

Jaako Eskola, chief executive of Finnish group Wartsila, one of the world's largest manufacturers of marine engines, also openly backed calls to curb carbon emission in shipping, arguing that shipbuilders need confidence to invest in clean technology. But "a determined minority is blocking ambition on capping emissions and defining a Paris-credible decarbonisation pathway. These moves are being portrayed as unachievable and a cap on world trade despite scientific evidence to the contrary being presented," said Bill Hemmings, shipping director at Brussels-based NGO Transport & Environment. His organisation argued that those opposing an ambitious climate target for the shipping sector are banking on the need for consensus to ensure that the outcome will kill all ambition.

"Clear warnings from delegates from climate-vulnerable South Pacific nations that effective IMO action is a prerequisite for their countries' survival fell on deaf ears. There is a danger that calls for differentiated action and to buy time will see off any likelihood of urgent action," added Hemmings.

Slow steaming

Those in favour of an ambitious greenhouse gas reduction strategy argue the technology that could reduce emissions in the shipping industry already exist, as well as financial tools, i.e incentives.

Faid Abbasov from T&E cited slow steaming as an example of an adequate tool to reduce effectively carbon emission in the short-term.

Slow steaming refers to the practice of operating transoceanic cargo ships, especially container ships, at significantly less than their maximum speed.

"If ships slow their speed down by 30%, they would reduce their emissions by 200 million tonnes a year, which is about what The Netherlands are emitting", he said.

Market-based measures would be effective in the mid-term, he added - an argument echoed by Aoife O'Leary, a legal analyst at European Defence Fund.

"Shipping has an opportunity to show to the world it can step up to the challenge of climate change with an ambitious strategy, enacted through effective policies and measures. Key to this will be securing a redirection of capital to assist the commercialisation of low emission technology", he said.

"For example, a carbon price could be recycled back into the sector through a fund supporting the deployment of low or zero carbon vessels and sustainable fuels. Work on policies will need to start as soon as the ink dries on the interim strategy, which should be strengthened and agreed in the MEPC next week."



UN draft calls on international shipping to halve greenhouse gas emissions by 2050

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