

Speech by Capt. Jacques D'Havé – Administrator General
Agency for Maritime and Coastal Services

Mr Chairman,
Ladies and Gentlemen,
Delegates to the Interreg Conference,

As Administrator General for the Agency for Maritime and Coastal Services, it's an honour to speak at the Safety Project Fair Interreg. The agency MDK consist of four divisions: the Pilotage, the Shipping Assistance division, the Fleet, and the Coastal department.

To guarantee safe and efficient shipping traffic is a great challenge, which requires great efforts. On the basis of my competence for pilotage services and the vessel traffic services from and to the ports, as well as the salvage and tug services at sea, the internally autonomous agency for Maritime Services & Coast makes more than adequate efforts to guarantee safety at sea and on the river Scheldt.

Accidents at sea are spectacular. Again and again, accidents at sea focus attention on this: the rapid and efficient coordination and execution of rescue activities are essential to safeguard the environment.

Therefore safety at sea is not only a Flemish or federal matter, safety has to be seen in an international context. A safe North Sea is also important for various other countries. Most of the countries on the North Sea are involved through the European project, Safety@Sea. These are Norway, Sweden, Denmark, the Netherlands, Great Britain and Flanders.

The Flemish government actively participates in a number of projects,.

One of these projects, targets at "improved operational decision support" for Marine Rescue Coordination Centres.

The Shipping Assistance Division is competent, as the "Search and Rescue" (SAR) authority, for the maritime rescue activities in the Belgian SAR zone, while rescues and towing at sea are carried out by the Fleet and other coastguard partners as the helicopter base in Koksyde or the navy in Zeebrugge. This SAR zone is geographically a small area in the North Sea, but is one of the busiest shipping channels in the world. On average there are 50,000 journeys by maritime ships, 40,000 by ferries, 25,000 for recreational purposes and approximately 15,000 by fishing vessels per year. More than 200 million tons of goods are transported in this area every year. A number of these goods are catalogued as being dangerous and/or polluting, so-called IMO cargoes.

Furthermore, this area encompasses the access channels to the Flemish seaports, and it requires special attention to ensure that the shipping traffic can take place safely and efficiently.

For this reason we included a project in the 2004-2009 Public Works Policy Memorandum, which provides for the construction of a new Maritime Rescue and Coordination Centre (MRCC).

One concrete result of this Safety @ Sea project is the exchange of Automatic Identification System information (AIS) between all the countries of the northern North Sea (Flanders, the United Kingdom, the Netherlands, Denmark, Sweden, Norway, etc.), in which the Ostend MRCC also receives all the AIS information. Via the legal framework of SafeSeaNet, there is a maritime information exchange between the MRCC and the European Maritime Safety Agency. This exchange takes place completely automatically every two hours. This also responds to the European Monitoring Directive.

Works on Coastal Zone Management

Two projects address coastal zone management in the North Sea Region.

The first project is pursuing improved rules and procedures for emergency preparedness arrangements. The Prestige accident triggered an intense discussion on places of refuge. The option chosen, to tow the ship out on the sea, seems not to have been the best option in respect to minimizing the environmental impacts. The option to tow the ship to a place of refuge seems in arrears to have been a much better option as a whole.

The responsibility of emergency preparedness and implementation is at national level. However, the local communities affected by designated place of refuge are feeling they take the full burden of the pollution and subsequent negative impacts of an accident, like a polluted coastline, limitation in fishing, sea farming and reduced tourism. Hence, it is important to select places of refuge by a planning process and procedures that involves the regions and local communities in question.

The project is led by Norway, in which the Ghent Maritime Institute, with professor Maes also actively participates for Flanders on plans for coastal zone management and emergency response planning.

A second project focuses on the dramatic increase in offshore wind farms and Offshore Wind Farm Risk Management

This project deals with the possibility of maritime accidents in connection with offshore wind farms. Electrical power from offshore wind farms will make an important contribution to future energy and climate policies in the EU. Average wind forces at sea are high enough to promise an enormous potential in energy.

The consequences of a ship collision with an offshore wind farm could have an impact on the offshore wind farm itself (damages, injuries, loss of energy production), on the colliding ship and on the environment (spills).

The Safety@Sea project also includes a module which will increase the safety in relation to windmill farms still to be built. This is also integrated in the MRCC of Ostend. Rescue simulations for windmill farms are provided with a software package.

Therefore I am pleased to note that this European project has led to an exchange of ideas, experience – in short, “**maritime know-how**”.

Therefore today is an important day, because we can indicate a direction in which Interreg projects can be started in the new Interreg program, with the interaction of the audience that is present, possibly also to follow the current Safety@Sea project which ends in the middle of 2007, and which aspects in terms of content must be included in these Interreg projects by the maritime authority in the next few years for the whole of Europe.