Since the break up and sinking of the single hull tanker "Prestige" off the Northern coast of Spain in November 2002, the issue of decommissioning or conversion of single hull tankers has been hotly debated once again.

The timetable given in Regulation 13G in Annex I of MARPOL 73/78* has already been revised following the Erika incident in December 1999. IMO explanatory article. However, with the sinking of the "Prestige" came renewed calls for yet further acceleration of the phase out timetable and, in some cases, an immediate ban.

In April 2003 the fifteen Member States of the European Union submitted to IMO their proposals to amend the phase out timetable for single-hull tankers, for an immediate ban on the carriage of heavy grades of oil in single-hull tankers and for the 

Condition Assessment Scheme (CAS) has been adopted in 2001 in the wake of the 1999 Erika incident) to be applied to tankers of 15 years of age and above.

These proposals were considered by IMO's Marine Environment Protection Committee (MEPC) at its 49th session (14-18 July 2003). The MEPC held extensive discussions in a Working Group and in plenary in relation to these proposals. The outcome of the discussions was as follows, with further discussion scheduled for an extra MEPC session in December 2003, which will consider, with a view to adoption, the proposed amendments to MARPOL 73/78:

- The MEPC agreed on an accelerated phase-out for Category 1 tankers (pre-MARPOL tankers). This would bring forward the final phasing-out date for these tankers from 2007 to 2005.
- The MEPC discussed the proposal to bring forward the phasing-out of category 2 and 3 tankers (MARPOL tankers and smaller tankers) from 2015 to 2010. While there was substantial support in principle for the 2010 deadline, there was concern that this would also mean the phase-out of tankers that were less than 20 years old in 2010. There was a suggested proposal, for further consideration in December, which would see the operational life of such tankers extended to 2015 or until the ship reaches a specified age (e.g. 20, 23 or 25 years), subject to satisfactory results from the Condition Assessment Scheme (CAS).
- The MEPC agreed, in principle, that the CAS should be applied to single-hull tankers of 15 years, or older (as against being applicable to all Category 1 vessels continuing to trade after 2005 and all Category 2 vessels after 2010. The MEPC agreed to circulate the proposed CAS amendments with a view to consideration for adoption at the extra session in December.
- The proposed ban on the carriage of Heavy Grades of Oil (HGO) in single-hull tankers was considered. The MEPC agreed on the need for further technical discussion at the December meeting of the proposed new regulation 13H on prevention of oil pollution when carrying heavy grades of oil, in particular in relation to the physical properties of heavy grades of oil (including their definition by reference to density and kinematic viscosity) and in pollution combating.
- The MEPC noted the differing views on the issue of tankers carrying HGO engaged in domestic trades, regarding possible exemptions for tankers on local voyages and agreed this was a policy matter for a later decision.
- The MEPC agreed that the Informal Group of Experts should be re-established to review the impact of the proposals discussed at this session. The extra session of the Committee will be held as MEPC 50 on 1 and 4 December 2003, during the 23rd IMO Assembly, (which meets from 24 November to 5 December 2003).

A related issue considered by the MEPC was the proposal for a West European PSSA.

The MEPC approved in principle a proposal for Belgium, France, Ireland, Portugal, Spain and the United Kingdom to designate a Particularly Sensitive Sea Area (PSSA) to cover a wide sea area west of those countries, subject to the area being reduced to bring the easterly line off the Shetland Isles to 00 longitude.

The States proposing this measure withdrew an earlier proposal to ban carriage of heavy fuel oil in single-hull tankers in the PSSA and instead agreed that the Associated Protective Measures linked to the PSSA would, at this stage, concern a proposed 48-hour reporting rule for ships carrying certain cargoes entering the PSSA. This measure would be referred to the Sub-Committee on Safety of Navigation (NAV), meeting mid-2004, for consideration.

The Western European Waters PSSA will be considered by the Committee for potential final designation at the regular session of MEPC in October 2004.

This article is based on IMO Briefing 18/2003 on the Marine Environment Protection Committee (MEPC) 49th session: 14-18 July 2003. Other issues considered at this session include Ballast Water Management, Anti-Fouling Systems, Ship Recycling, Other PSSAs and more. These issues are also reported in IMO's Briefing 18/2003 available on the IMO website at www.imo.org.

Update - August 2003

A week after MEPC 49 the European Council adopted a resolution on single-hull tankers substantially in the form of the proposals submitted to IMO in April 2003, i.e. they did not reflect the amendments proposed at MEPC 49. Click here to view Steamship website article on the European Council resolution.

*International Convention for the Prevention of Pollution from Ships, 1973, as modified by the Protocol of 1978 relating thereto (MARPOL 73/78)