

Is Canada doing enough to prevent shipping incidents?

By Dr. Richard Wiefelspuett

Like electricity and everything it powers, marine shipping and all it delivers is largely taken for granted in Canada — until something goes wrong.

When the power goes out in our homes, we feel an immediate impact to our way of living. Only then do we appreciate the importance of electricity and how much we are dependent on its near-constant availability.

Likewise, when a container ship is delayed with goods for export or import, or a marine incident near our coastal communities makes the headlines, we become aware of our dependence on safe and sustainable marine shipping practices — both to protect Canada's waterways and to keep our shipping lanes open for business.

A recent report by the Council of Canadian Academies (CCA) identified some of the risks and potential impacts of commercial marine shipping across Canada. The good news is that *Commercial Marine Shipping Accidents: Understanding the Risks in Canada* confirms the consensus that Canadian shipping standards are improving, accidents are fewer, and that advanced technology and better ship design are reducing the potential for accidents.

But it's not all clear seas ahead for Canada. The report also reveals a lack of available

data and research to fully understand the types and causes of marine shipping risks, the near misses, and especially the correlation between reported incidents/accidents and actual ship movements by vessel type.

In Canada, the conversation about marine shipping safety is mainly focused on the period during and after a potential marine emergency. As a result, "response and recovery" are well addressed both from a policy and funding perspective. The public dialogue is less focused, however, on the phase before a potential marine emergency — including elements of prevention and mitigation.

Strengthening the prevention regime does not diminish the importance of Canada's ongoing improvements and increased collaboration among agencies regarding incident preparedness and response. Instead, paying closer attention to prevention addresses what the CCA study also highlighted: actions taken to avert an incident or accident before it can occur are essential to fostering marine shipping's social licence to operate.

Whether it's the expansion of a pipeline, building a hydroelectric dam or adding capacity to a marine port, Canadians increasingly expect proponents to build the case for

their project — in a meaningful, thorough and inclusive manner — prior to actually building or expanding it. In other words, social licence to operate and grow is dependent upon decreasing real and perceived risks before they turn into actual events. And that's why prevention is so important.

In recent years, the Canadian government has been preparing for growth in shipping by addressing the broad marine safety system. It has done so knowing that Canadians and the country's economic growth demand a safe and sustainable marine shipping industry.

For example, the Prime Minister's Mandate Letter to the Minister of Transportation very clearly outlines two strategic priorities linked to marine safety — the first to improve overall marine safety, and the second to formalize a moratorium on crude oil tanker traffic on B.C.'s north coast.

Clear Seas supports this pursuit of a coastal strategy aimed at improving marine safety. We believe that these priorities are achievable, when based on the most credible and unbiased information, including research and analysis that focuses on preventative measures.

Our economic prosperity has been and will remain dependent on getting Canadian goods to global markets via marine shipping. From coast to coast to coast, Canada's economic growth is intrinsically linked to the marine shipping industry. This was confirmed in a recently commissioned Clear Seas poll which showed Canadians' overall positive views about marine shipping, its safety record, and its contribution to the Canadian economy.

But the poll also revealed Canadians' strong concerns about the safety risks that could threaten our environment, especially potential oil and fuel spills.

As a result, and in order for the federal government to deliver on its mandate to improve marine safety, Clear Seas has recommended the establishment of an industry and government-funded Marine Emergency Prevention Fund. This would not only complement Canada's preparedness and response regimes, it would address what Canadians also largely take for granted: that all is being done to prevent marine shipping incidents before they might occur.

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