

## Arctic shipping: Why Europe must say No to heavy fuel oil

Written by Sirpa Pietikäinen on 28 April 2017 in Opinion  
Opinion

It's time to ban the use of heavy fuel oil in Arctic waters before it does any more harm to our environment, writes Sirpa Pietikäinen.



Sirpa Pietikäinen | *Photo credit: European Parliament audiovisual*

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On 16 March, the European Parliament voted to adopt a resolution on an integrated EU policy for the Arctic.

While controversy over a total ban on oil drilling stole most of the attention, the Arctic resolution also contained a renewed call to ban the use of heavy fuel oil, or HFO, by ships operating in Arctic waters.

Heavy fuel oil is a dirty and polluting fossil fuel that powers ships throughout our seas and oceans. It poses risks for both the marine environment and climate wherever it's used, but if it spilled in the colder waters of the Arctic, HFO breaks down even more slowly, with long-term devastating effects on

both livelihoods and ecosystems.

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HFO is also the source of harmful and significantly higher emissions of air pollutants, including sulphur oxide, nitrogen oxide, particulate matter, including black carbon. When emitted and deposited on Arctic snow or ice, the climate warming effect of black carbon is five times more than when emitted at lower latitudes, such as in the tropics.

Last month it emerged that Arctic sea ice has hit record low - the lowest amount of winter ice in 38 years. This sea ice loss is likely driven by human use of fossil fuels, and the disappearance of the ice also opens up potential for an increase in Arctic shipping - and yet more use of fossil fuels in the Arctic, and therefore more black carbon. This is bad news for the remaining sea ice, as more open water means more absorption of the sun's warmth and heating of the Arctic Ocean - a vicious cycle.

Last December, to help drive improvements in Arctic shipping rules, the US and Canada announced a 'phase down' of the dirtiest of marine fuels HFO from use in vessels operating in the Arctic.

This follows formal notification of the International Maritime Organisation (IMO) by both governments in September 2016 that a "heavy fuel oil spill in the Arctic could cause long-term damage to the environment."

The US and Canada, along with Iceland, Norway, Finland, Germany and The Netherlands, have now proposed, in time for the next meeting of the IMO's marine environment protection committee in July 2017, that work begins on mitigating the risks of use and carriage of HFO as fuel by ships in the Arctic. The European Parliament has broadly supported this move by adopting its call for a ban on the use of HFO in Arctic waters.

But passive support is not enough. As July approaches, more European members of the International Maritime Organisation must step forward and lend their voices to the growing number of IMO members calling for an Arctic phase out of HFO.

If the IMO fails to bring about an end to HFO use, the Commission and member states should look into the possibility of creating rules to prohibit the use and carriage of HFO for vessels calling at ports in the EU.

Outside politics, momentum towards an HFO phase out is building. The Danish ship owners' association and Arctic expedition cruise operator Hurtigruten have called for regulating or banning the use of HFO in the Arctic.

In January, Hurtigruten joined the Clean Arctic Alliance to launch the Arctic Commitment at the Arctic Frontiers conference in Tromsø, Norway. The Arctic Commitment brings together shipping operators, polar explorers, NGOs, communities and businesses to demand that the IMO phase out the use of HFO, while urging the broader shipping industry switch to alternative fuels before such a ban is in

place.

We MEPs, as direct representatives of European citizens, have stated our opinion: it's time to end the use of HFO in Arctic waters. Our national governments now must carry this forward, first by supporting any steps taken at this July's marine environment protection committee meeting to mitigate the risks of HFO, and ensure that any resulting IMO measures are enforced, so that heavy fuel oil can be finally banned from Arctic waters.

### **About the author**

Sirpa Pietikäinen (EPP, FI) is a substitute member of Parliament's environment, public health and food safety committee

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