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US EPA 2013 VGP Requirements come into effect 19 December 2013

On 28 March 2013, the US Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) issued the 2013 Vessel General Permit (2013 VGP) to regulate discharges incidental to the normal operation of commercial vessels. As the 2013 VGP becomes effective on 19 December 2013, about 12,500 foreign flagged vessels are expected to be subject to the updated VGP requirements and be required to obtain authorization under this new permit. New ships (built after 19 December 2013) will be obliged to comply with various new requirements, such as ballast water treatment and monitoring of treated bilge and grey water.

The EPA has added training as a new requirement of the 2013 VGP, requiring vessel operators to outline their training plans in order to ensure that all key vessel personnel sufficiently understand the nature of eligible discharges and the terms of the permit, and are properly trained to respond to fuel spills and operate and maintain the pollution prevention equipment of their vessels.

The most important changes of the 2013 VGP compared to the 2008 version are highlighted below:

Reporting Requirements

All vessels granted with a permit are required to submit an Annual Report each calendar year, except for 2013. The Annual Report practically replaces the one-time and the annual non-compliance reports of the 2008 VGP by consolidating them into one reporting form. As well as data relative to the actual discharges of a vessel and the voyages conducted in US waters, information must be included in the Annual Report on the functionality monitoring of the ballast water treatment system installed on a vessel, as well as the detailed monitoring of the exhaust gas scrubber effluent water, bilge and grey water, as applicable.

Ballast Water Treatment

The EPA has aligned the VGP requirements on ballast water treatment with those of the US Coast Guard (Standards for Living Organisms in Ships' Ballast Water Discharged in US waters, 33 CFR Part 151 and 46 CFR Part 162) by adopting identical, numeric ballast water discharge limits, which in turn are identical to those of the IMO D2 standard. These limits must be met by using a ballast water treatment system, any available onshore treatment facilities, or a public water supply system. A ballast water treatment system, through which discharge is to take place in US waters, must be type approved by the US Coast Guard or designated as an Alternate Management System.

Lubricants

All vessels must use Environmentally Acceptable Lubricants – EALs (which are biodegradable, minimally toxic and not bio-accumulative) in all oil-to-sea interfaces, unless it is not technically feasible (that means that such commercial products are not approved for use in a given shipboard application, or that there aren't any alternatives available in the market, etc.). Any use of lubricants that are not characterized or certified as EALs must be documented in the Annual Report. Oil-to-sea interfaces covered include stern tubes, thruster / rudder bearings, etc.

Training

The 2013 VGP places emphasis on the sufficient training of vessel personnel who actively take part in the management of incidental discharges. Training has become one of the six general requirements applicable to all ships regardless of their type. The other existing requirements include: material storage, the management of toxic and hazardous materials, the prevention of overflows and fuel spills, the control of oil discharges and compliance with other regulations.

AMC over the past years has prepared numerous VGP Manuals for all types of vessels and can assist in the preparation of subject manuals in accordance with the 2013 requirements.

A sample VGP Manual is available here.