



EU puts ferry safety rules on fast track

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New European safety legislation aimed at passenger ferries is to become law in December after being fast tracked through the European Parliament yesterday.

Commission proposals mean the Stockholm agreement, ensuring ro-ro ships stay afloat for longer after an accident, will be extended from vessels plying northern European routes to include the south and Mediterranean from 2015.

The Stockholm agreement was put in place after the 1995 Estonia ferry disaster in the Baltic but not implemented in Southern Europe.

Brussels originally wanted a 2010 compliance date for the Stockholm agreement community wide but agreed a five-year extension for ferries which comply already with international stability standards.

Other proposals adopted will extend an existing safety directive to include new safety requirements for high-speed ships and for passengers with reduced mobility.

A third part of the Brussels legislation affects liability payments for passengers killed or injured in a maritime accident will bring it into line with an IMO convention agreed last week which set a compensation limit of e 333,000 (\$327,000) for each passenger.

Loyola de Palacio, vice-president in charge of transport and energy, said: "This is a great step ahead which completes ideally the various proposals we have already made to improve maritime safety.

"Our proposals aim at preventing horrific accidents such as the Express Samina in 2000." The Greek passenger ferry sank with the loss of 80 lives off Paros.

Mrs de Palacio added: "The proposals strengthen the safety requirements and extend specific stability standards all over Europe, which means that our citizens will benefit from the same high safety levels everywhere in the European Union, irrespective of the flag of the ship."

The safety package proposals were announced in March this year and could be adopted next month in a single reading procedure.

This has been achieved because the European Parliament and the Council of Ministers, representing EU member states, are in broad agreement on the proposals.

For Mrs de Palacio this is another notable achievement in pushing through tough new legislation following a maritime disaster.

Her directorate reacted quickly with the wide-ranging Erika I and II vessel safety legislation after the Italian-registered, 37,283 dwt tanker sank off the French coast in December, 1999, causing an environmental disaster.

"It is always satisfactory to see parliament and council decide so quickly on such important proposals regarding safety measures," said the commissioner.

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