



Containers Lost At Sea

Proper cargo loading and stowage of containers is very important to the safety of a container ship, its cargo and its crew, to shore-based workers and equipment, and to the environment. Even with proper loading of the cargo into the container and secure stowage aboard ship, a number of factors ranging from severe weather and rough seas to more catastrophic and rare events like ship grounding or collision can result in containers being lost overboard while at sea.

A question which has deserved an informed answer is: How many containers actually are lost at sea? The World Shipping Council (WSC) has seen various statements in public that the industry loses 10,000 containers a year at sea. The WSC understood that this number is grossly excessive and concurs with the statement of the National Cargo Bureau: "there have been no comprehensive statistics kept, as to the number of containers lost overboard."

In an effort to shed greater clarity on the issue, the WSC undertook a survey of its members to obtain a more accurate estimate of the number of containers lost overboard on an annual basis. The WSC's members represent over 90 percent of the global containership capacity. Members were asked to provide the actual number of containers lost overboard for three previous consecutive years. Those carriers that responded represent over 70 percent of the global container ship capacity. WSC assumed for the purpose of this analysis that the container losses for the 30% of the industry that did not respond to the survey would be roughly the same as the 70% of the industry that responded.¹ As a result, the total annual figure reported has been adjusted upward to provide an estimated loss figure for all carriers, both WSC members and non-members, and arrive at a total industry figure. Some carriers reported that they lost no containers during the period, while others noted a catastrophic loss, which for the purposes of this analysis was defined as a loss overboard of 50 or more containers in a single incident. Catastrophic losses are rare. The number of containers lost in a catastrophic event can vary greatly -- from 50 to several hundred.

Based on the survey results, the World Shipping Council estimates that on average there are approximately 350 containers lost at sea each year, not counting catastrophic events. When one counts the catastrophic losses, an average total loss per year of approximately 675 containers was observed.

¹ This assumption may over-estimate the number of containers lost because it extrapolates lost container numbers including catastrophic losses as defined above, even though we are unaware of any catastrophic losses suffered by the non-reporting operators during the years covered.

Containers Lost at Sea (continued)

Total industry losses obviously vary from year to year, but these numbers are well below the 2,000 to 10,000 per year that regularly appear publicly, and represent a very small fraction of container loads shipped each year.² Nevertheless, the industry continues to pursue measures to reduce the number of containers lost overboard to zero.

Containers lost overboard as a result of events related to severe weather are usually outside the control of carriers, stevedores, or shippers, and unfortunately, such events are unlikely to disappear completely. But the industry has been supporting a number of efforts undertaken in recent years to reduce the number of containers lost at sea. One effort is the joint industry/government project, called Lashing@Sea³, led by the Maritime Research Institute of the Netherlands (MARIN).

Another effort is the joint publication of [Safe Transport of Containers by Sea: Industry Guidance for Shippers and Container Stuffers](#) by the International Chamber of Shipping (ICS) and the World Shipping Council (WSC), which provides recommended best practices for ships, port facilities, and shippers in the loading and handling of cargo containers.

A related effort is the joint decision by the International Maritime Organization (IMO), the International Labour Organization (ILO), and the United Nations Economic Commission for Europe (UNECE) to develop an IMO/ILO/UNECE code of practice for packing of cargo transport units, including containers. The WSC participates in a group of experts tasked with preparing recommendations on the draft code of practice with a target publication date in 2013.

A further, very positive development is the agreement by the International Maritime Organization to undertake a review of the issues involved, including agreement to consider the proposal of the WSC and ICS to require that the actual weight of every loaded container be verified and provided to the vessel operator prior to stowing aboard a ship, because misdeclared container weights have contributed to the loss of containers overboard, as well as to other safety and operational problems. In September 2011, the IMO will begin consideration of this proposal.

Any loss of a cargo container overboard is a loss that carriers diligently seek to prevent. While the actual number of containers lost at sea is dramatically less than most public statements have indicated, the industry's goal is to reduce those losses to as close to zero as possible.

² In 2010, the international liner shipping industry carried approximately 100 million containers of cargo. 500 lost containers would constitute 0.0005 percent of the loaded containers transported.

³ <http://www.marin.nl/web/JIPs-Networks/Archived-JIPs-Public/Lashingsea.htm>