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Will ports bar cargo ships with COVID-19-positive crew?

Greg Miller, Senior Editor  · Thursday, April 2, 2020  0  259  4 minutes read



 COVID-19 is likely to complicate port calls. Photo credit: Jim Allen/FreightWaves



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Ports have yet to deny container, dry bulk or tanker ships the right to load or unload cargo due to coronavirus outbreaks among crew. But things could get much dicier in the months to come.

What happens will differ from country to country, and likely, from state to state and port to port. If seafarer infections follow the trajectory seen on land, trade

flows will hinge on how each local authority responds to [vessels with COVID-19-positive crew on board](#).

The secretary general of the International Maritime Organization (IMO), an agency within the United Nations, [issued recommendations last week on how governments and national authorities should facilitate the continued free flow of maritime trade](#). The International Chamber of Shipping (ICS) and other industry groups provided the recommendations to the IMO.

The first recommendation on the list will be particularly important if seafarer infections jump. It urges that “quarantine restrictions are not imposed on *the ship itself* which prevent access to a berth and the timely discharge and/or loading of cargoes or other critical activities.” The italics are the IMO’s.

How pivotal this recommendation turns out to be depends on the answers to the following hypothetical questions:

Will crew changes increase onboard infections?

Seafarers have multimonth contracts after which they’re repatriated to their home countries and replaced by new crew; normally, around 100,000 crew are globally in transit per week.

[Coronavirus-induced travel restrictions have halted crew changes, but the stoppage is inherently temporary](#) – crew cannot be indefinitely forced to work seven days a week beyond their contract terms.

Some jurisdictions are starting to allow crew changes, including China (for Chinese crew only), Singapore and the U.K. The IMO urged all nations to [designate seafarers, regardless of nationality, as “key workers”](#) exempt from travel restrictions.

If crew changes resume over the next several quarters, it’s fair to assume shipboard coronavirus infections would increase above current levels.

One reason there have been virtually no infections – [the first was just confirmed on the Gjertrud Maersk](#) – is that commercial-shipping seafarers have very limited interactions with individuals on land. Crew changes will bring aboard individuals who have spent the past several months on land.

Will more testing increase the number of seafarers testing positive?

Another reason so few cargo-ship seafarers have tested positive is that very few cargo-ship seafarers have been tested at all. In contrast, outbreaks aboard passenger ships elicit heavy publicity and crew are frequently tested along with passengers; passengers presumably bring the virus on board and infect the crew.

Coronavirus testing remains time-consuming and limited in capacity, but new tests are being developed that are [much faster, providing results within minutes](#), and more mobile.

As testing becomes more accessible, health and port authorities could have a greater ability and proclivity to test the seafarers on incoming vessels. A combination of more crew changes and more accessible testing would theoretically lead to more seafarers testing positive in the future than they do today.

Asked by FreightWaves why testing is not mentioned in the preliminary guidelines provided to the IMO, ICS Secretary General Guy Platten responded, “The ICS is working closely with the World Health Organization and the International Maritime Health Association on assessing any development on the spread of COVID-19 on ships.

“At the moment, based on the advice of the two organizations, there is limited use in testing anyone with throat swabs if they are not showing symptoms,” Platten said. “However, the ICS believes it would be advisable to test seafarers with respiratory symptoms to ascertain whether or not they have the virus.

“The ICS would welcome the use of the antibody test when it becomes widely available as it would be vital to ensure seafarers are safe against the virus,” he continued, adding, “We are aware the situation is incredibly fluid and the ICS will keep a close watch on any future developments.”

Will ships be able to evacuate infected seafarers?

If a port or health authority determines that seafarers on an arriving ship are positive for COVID-19, can they be evacuated from the ship to a hospital in that country? Most crew are Filipino, Indian or Chinese. If a crewman is of nationality “X,” will all non-X countries allow that crewman into their hospitals for urgent care?

Port countries are required to do so under the [Maritime Labour Convention of 2006 \(Regulation 4.1.3\)](#), but amid the pandemic panic, and given how countries have responded to infections on cruise ships, the answer is unclear.

If COVID-19-positive seafarers cannot be evacuated from a ship, it’s far less likely that the ship would be allowed into a terminal to load or unload any cargo.

In the case of Panama, where there are five major container transshipment hubs – Balboa, PSA-Panama, MIT, CCT and Cristobal – the Ministry of Health has [decreed that no port call is allowed by any ship with even a single COVID-19-positive seafarer on board](#).

Will ports bar ships if all infected seafarers are evacuated?

It is not only essential that positive-testing crew members can be evacuated to the port country (both for business and humanitarian reasons). It’s also essential that vessels be permitted to come to berth after all infected seafarers are evacuated and the ships are disinfected.

In other words, that the physical vessel is not deemed infected, or as the IMO put it, that quarantine restrictions are not imposed on the ship itself.

Different government officials will likely make different decisions. There are no enforceable global standards on how ports should deal with coronavirus; the IMO can only make suggestions. Shipping-services company Wilhelmsen [curates a frequently updated global map of coronavirus port restrictions](#) that reveals just how widely policies vary.

The optimistic view is that practicality and necessity will prevail when it comes to port calls, for three reasons.

First, it's more likely that port workers will be COVID-19-positive than seafarers, given that land-based workers have more interpersonal interactions. Second, [coronavirus is already in virtually every country on the planet](#), so restricting ship traffic does relatively little to protect the populace.

And third, countries need seaborne imports of food, medical supplies and other essential cargoes. As Flexport Global Head of Ocean Freight [Nerijus Poskus bluntly put it during a recent interview with FreightWaves](#), governments can't allow coronavirus to impede cargo flows through ports because if they did, "we would run out of food." [More FreightWaves/American Shipper articles by Greg Miller](#)

