

June 23, 2010—Top story

Belize Registry set for quality expansion through new law



Looking after a fleet of 1,200 vessels, IMMARBE, the International Merchant Marine Registry of Belize, operating for more than 20 years, is viewing itself as a rising force among the open registries of the world and more importantly not as yet another flag of convenience. Hellenic Shipping News Worldwide spoke with the registry's director general Captain Encarnacion Samaniego, during the registry's presence at the recent international exhibition of Posidonia, held in Athens. "Seven years ago, we began the process of cleaning up the registry from older vessels, deleting hundreds of potentially dangerous ships. We then turned our attention to quality vessels and adopted an aggressive marketing strategy in order to persuade ship owners that we are a quality registry. Currently we are pushing to reduce the number of our non-IACS vessels, while our European-owned ships are 100% IACS" says Cpt. Samaniego. At the same time, the registry has implemented tough rules, since each vessel is immediately deleted after two consecutive detentions. Already, IMMARBE has begun marketing its services to Hellenic ship owners, since December of 2009, securing 37 vessel registrations. During 2009, the registry enlisted 32 new buildings (from various countries), while already in the first five months of 2010, the number of new buildings stands at 17 (7 of which during May). Most of the vessels are dry bulk carriers, feeder vessels and container ships. The registry is also looking to establish a permanent office branch in Hellas, as well as Singapore next year, identifying the Hellenic and Japanese markets as the most important ones to its development.

According to Cpt. Samaniego, "the flag of convenience type of registries will disappear over the next five years the most, because of IMO and other relative regulations. We want to compete with registries like those of Panama, Bahama and Liberia. To do that, the only way for us it to move to new buildings and bigger vessels through a quality service. That's why we have enhanced our technical team of people and introduced a 24-hour service, 7 days a week, 365 days a year. Also, this October we are looking to ask IMO to perform a voluntary audit of the registry, while this year we'll also have ratified the ILO Convention". But the registry doesn't want to expand too much too soon. "We are aiming for a fleet of 2,500 vessels, not 4,000, because we want to maintain a personal feeling of service providing" says the director general.

As a result of these efforts towards quality, the Belize Registry is currently managing a quality fleet of 1,200 vessels, registering an increase of 37% in new ships during 2009, versus the year before. That percentage is predicted to increase by 50% this year, especially if the relative legislative framework is amended within the next couple of months as expected. The new legislation will be more modern to cater current needs in the market, as well as to offer financing options to ship owners. The New Act brings in substantial improvements with regards to mortgages; it reflects the recommendations by the IMO Law Commission for ship mortgages of common law jurisdictions. Another important feature of the mortgage addition to the act, is that it can apply to vessels under construction (clear provisions as to the definition and the registration of vessels under construction are also made under the New Act to facilitate such registrations. The mortgagee has powers to sell the ship by private sale.

Also, through the new law, the registry continues its tradition of facilitating registrations of vessels and mortgages via the system of Provisional and Permanent Licences and Preliminary and Permanent registration of titles and mortgages. No pre-registration inspections are required a requisite of provisional licence. In any case, as Cpt. Samaniego says, "we want ship owners to feel secure about Belize, in terms of their mortgages, since he currently have seven law firms, dedicated to the maritime industry".

After his graduation as a merchant marine officer, Captain Samaniego sailed with Exxon Tanker Inc. He later became a professor at the Nautical School of Panama, where he assumed several roles, the last one being professor in charge of the Deck Department. For four years, Captain Samaniego was a member of the Board of Governors and the Executive Council in the World Maritime University in Malmo, Sweden.

Captain Samaniego worked for 20 years at the Panama Canal Commission, later Panama Canal Authority, where he made important contributions. Most of the time as a Maritime Training Officer, he participated in the preparation of hundreds of professionals for maritime positions in the Canal. He led and participated in projects to improve the Canal operation, such as developing the operation regulations for the Panama Canal after the year 2000.

Captain Samaniego has performed several positions at the request of the Government in the Maritime Authority of Panama. He structured the Directorate General of Seafarers, and managed it for several years. Here he worked to make the Panamanian Registry part of the International Maritime Organization White List for its compliance with the STCW Convention. He also founded the International Maritime University in Panama.

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