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Carriers Move Full Speed into Slow Steaming

Annual savings as high as \$20 million expected for some routes

Rising fuel prices and overcapacity are spurring container ship lines to operate more of their ships at extraordinarily slow speeds – a trend that is expected to continue, according to Alphaliner Weekly Newsletter.

Approximately 2.3 percent of the world container ship fleet is expected to be extra slow steaming by the end of February, the newsletter said. That is the equivalent of 47 vessels of 3,000 to 13,500 20-foot container capacity – that otherwise would be idle – operating at 17 to 19 knots instead of full speed of 23 to 25 knots.

Alphaliner said that with bunker fuel prices now about \$500 a ton, extra slow steaming can save 5 to 7 percent on total operating costs of long-haul loops, including the costs of extra ships and containers required for longer transit times. The annual savings could total \$15 million to \$20 million for a typical Asia-Europe route using 8,500-TEU ships.

About 50 vessel loops, including 25 of 40 Asia-Europe loops, now use extra slow steaming, Alphaliner said. Carriers also are beginning to slow their ships on services between Asia and the U.S. East Coast and even on shorter Asia-West Coast routes where the potential savings are less.

Alphaliner said that by February, nine Asia-West Coast loops will operate at slower speeds, including two high-volume routes employing 8,000-8,500-TEU ships.

Seven of these nine loops are slowed by using nine ships instead of eight and adding a week to the voyage. Two other services have kept the voyage length unchanged by reducing the number of port calls.

Some carriers have gone a step beyond extra slow steaming and adopted "super slow steaming," running ships as slow as 14 to 16 knots on some segments of long backhaul routes from Europe to Asia.

Contact Joseph Bonney at jbonney@joc.com.

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