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Fender damage while berthing

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Web Alert: Fender damage while berthing

A regular recurring issue that the club deals with concerns fender damage during berthing operations.

Fender damage can be attributable to two distinct causes: (1) the vessels approach to the berth being incorrect, resulting in damage or (2) the fenders being of poor material and quality or incorrect type, resulting in damage when the vessel comes alongside or during its time at the berth. The former occur even when there are pilots on board (whose orders / actions frequently are not monitored by masters and their bridge teams). The latter claims are often spurious (port attempts to claim for previous damage to fenders) or where the fenders used were inadequate and were predictably damaged when a vessel came alongside.

To protect members' best interests, the club recommends that members undertake risk assessments when visiting unfamiliar ports / locations. The assessment should include possible damage to port property, berths or terminals where fenders are vulnerable or known to be in poor condition

There are a number of precautions that members can take prior to berthing and when it is determined that there is insufficient shore fendering.

If the master believes that the fenders on the berth are inadequate, he/she should consider seriously whether to berth the ship. In such cases the master should seek immediate advice from his Owners / Operators and the club's correspondent.

How does a master determine whether the fendering is adequate for a particular vessel?

This is not an exact science. Fender types and effectiveness vary dramatically, especially when one also takes into account the age and condition of the particular fender. What could be deemed adequate for one vessel could be inadequate for another. Because of these ambiguities the master will need to make a reasoned assessment on approach to the jetty. The following considerations should be included in the assessment:

- Nature of the berthing assistance such as tugs etc. that will be available during berthing
- Size of the fender
- Number of fenders
- Type of fender and positioning on the berth
- State of repair of fender (as much can be ascertained)
- The size of his/her own vessel
- Berth exposure to the local weather / sea conditions
- The mooring arrangements and whether they will be adequate to keep the vessel securely alongside, minimizing movement

If the masters have previous experience with a specific berth, they should be able to identify configurations of fenders that have proved adequate to enable the vessel to berth and remain safely alongside.

In addition, port agents are valuable sources of information for the state of the berth and the fenders. Agents should be contacted prior to arrival.

If permissible, photographic evidence of the condition of the shore fenders before arrival and after the vessels departure would be a practical way to protect owners' interests. Photographs of sufficient quality can be used to demonstrate the state of the fenders prior to the berthing maneuver (imperfections and all) and be matched with those images taken as the vessel departs to demonstrate the state of the fenders on departure.

The club is aware of a member who has instructed their vessels to take pictures of the fenders and the berths as their vessels approach. This can usually be done quickly and has proved effective in avoiding claims.

Visual reminders can also be painted on the ship's hull to highlight any areas at particular risk of being caught on fenders. Signs can also be placed on particular areas of the ship where fender contact must be avoided.

The club would like to remind members that the master and crew will almost always be legally responsible for the handling and berthing position of the ship, irrespective of a pilot or shore personnel giving guidance or instructions. Therefore, the masters have the authority to override the pilot at any time when they perceive that their vessels are endangered. Masters should ensure clear communications exist between the officers on watch and the pilots at all times. This is particularly important during berthing operations when continual observations and assistance from the ships' officers at the fore and aft stations during mooring operations is essential.

This emphasizes the requirement for diligent master/pilot exchanges and cooperation on the bridge. In many of the claims we have reviewed, excessive vessel speed during approach was a decisive factor in the occurrence of the incident.

Members should thus take note that the exchange of information between master and pilot does not shift the responsibility for the safety of the vessel from one to the other.