



# **Guidelines for large ships transiting the Danish Straits through the Great Belt**

**(First edition 2026)**



Issued by the

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**First edition 2026**

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## Glossary

**Air draft** Distance from sea level to the highest point on a ship.

**Draft** The depth of a ship below the waterline.

**Geopolitical** The influence of factors including geography, economics and demography on the politics and foreign policy of a state.

**Guidance** Provision of advice or information by OCIMF.

**Large ship** In this paper, a ship with a draft of 11m or more.

**Suezmax** Term for the largest tanker able to transit the Suez Canal in laden condition.

**Recommendations** OCIMF supports and endorses a particular method of working or procedure.

**Route T** The deep-water route through the Danish Straits.

**VLCC** Very Large Crude Carrier, which has a deadweight of 160 to 320 thousand metric tons.

## Abbreviations

<b>AHTS</b>	Anchor Handling Tug Supply
<b>AIS</b>	Automatic Identification System
<b>ARPA</b>	Automatic Radar Plotting Aid
<b>BELTREP</b>	Mandatory reporting system operated by Great Belt VTS
<b>DEMA</b>	Danish Emergency Management Agency
<b>DMA</b>	Danish Maritime Authority
<b>DMI</b>	Danish Meteorological Institute
<b>DW</b>	Deep Water
<b>ECDIS</b>	Electronic Chart Display and Information System
<b>GNSS</b>	Global Navigation Satellite Systems
<b>HELCOM</b>	The Baltic Marine Environment Protection Commission, also known as the Helsinki Commission
<b>ICS</b>	International Chamber of Shipping
<b>IMO</b>	International Maritime Organization
<b>m</b>	Metres
<b>OCIMF</b>	Oil Companies International Marine Forum
<b>PPG</b>	Passage Planning Guide, Baltic: Danish Straits
<b>SMS</b>	Safety Management System
<b>STS</b>	Ship to Ship
<b>TSS</b>	Traffic Separation Schemes
<b>UNCLOS</b>	United Nations Convention Law of the Sea
<b>VHF</b>	Very High Frequency
<b>VLCC</b>	Very Large Crude Carrier
<b>VTS</b>	Vessel Traffic Services

## **Bibliography**

*Baltic Sea Clean Shipping Guide 2017* (HELCOM)

*Bridge Procedures Guide* (ICS)

Copenhagen Convention 1857

*DMA Order no. 8230: Order on the ship reporting system BELTREP and on navigation under the East Bridge and the West Bridge in the Great Belt* (DMA)

*IMO Resolution MSC. 138 (76) Recommendation on Navigation Through the Entrances to the Baltic Sea* (IMO)

*IMO SN.1/Circ.263 23 October 2007 (page 8) Amendments to the Recommendation on Navigation through the Entrances to the Baltic Sea* (IMO)

*Navigation through Danish Waters* (DEMA)

<https://www.dma.dk/Media/638743469510433298/Navigation%20through%20Danish%20Water%20version%2016.0%202025.pdf>

*Passage Planning Guide, Baltic: Danish Straits* (Witberbys, DanPilot, BIMCO)

*The Regime of Passage Through the Danish Straits* (Netherlands Institute for the Law of the Sea)

*World Oil Transit Chokepoints* (US Energy Information Agency)

[https://www.eia.gov/international/analysis/special-topics/World\\_Oil\\_Transit\\_Chokepoints](https://www.eia.gov/international/analysis/special-topics/World_Oil_Transit_Chokepoints)

## 1 Introduction

The International Maritime Organization (IMO) has declared the Baltic Sea and its entrances a special area under MARPOL, due to its environmental and economic importance. This paper will refer to the area, which connects the Baltic Sea to the North Sea, as the Danish Straits. IMO's *Recommendation on Navigation Through the Entrances to the Baltic Sea* includes recommendations for pilotage services, maximum depth of water and safe draft through the Danish Straits. Mariners passing through the Danish Straits via the Great Belt – the western, deeper strait – face challenging navigational conditions, including water depth, currents, climatic conditions and traffic density. These risks can be minimised through good organisational and navigational planning. See figure 2.1 for a chart extract of the straits.

There has been an increased flow of large ships carrying hydrocarbon cargoes transiting the deep-water route of the Danish Straits (Route T) since 2022. The US Energy Information Agency details an increase of 60% in crude and petroleum products passing through the straits in 2023 compared to 2021. A preliminary study by OCIMF to identify gaps within current guidance revealed a lack of operational guidance.

This paper provides additional operational and organisational guidance for ship operators in developing risk assessments for large ships transiting from Skagen to Bornholm (southbound) or Bornholm to Skagen (northbound) through Route T. Ships other than large ships may use other routes for the full transit, the details of which are out of scope of this paper. Operators of these ships should refer to the *Passage Planning Guide, Baltic: Danish Straits* (PPG) and guidance provided by the Danish Emergency Management Agency (DEMA). DEMA has recently taken over responsibility from the Danish Maritime Authorities (DMA) for regulation of pilotage, IMO Route Systems, Notice to Mariners (MSI) and general safety of navigation within national waters.

The guidance given in this paper is consistent with IMO, DEMA and DMA recommendations.

## 2 The deep-water route (Route T) through the Danish Straits

Transiting the Danish Straits involves a choice of routes (northbound or southbound) to be followed by ships. Ships should refer to the PPG.

This paper provides guidance for large tankers transiting the Danish Straits using Route T.

Ship managers develop their own navigational procedures and guidelines for transiting restricted waters/narrow channels and where required location specific risk assessment. This paper supplements information available in the IMO *Recommendation on Navigation Through the Entrances to the Baltic Sea* and recommends additional measures to mitigate identified risks based on the experience of OCIMF member organisations.



Figure 2.1: Map of the Danish Straits showing transit routes.  
Source: PPG – Baltic, 2022 Edition



**Figure 2.2:** An overview of the Danish Straits, showing transit routes.  
 Source: DEMA Navigation through Danish Water version 16.0 (FEB 2025)

## 2.1 Current international regulations

The legal framework of the Danish Straits or Baltic entrances is set by the Copenhagen Convention 1857, which “provides that no ship shall in passing the Sound or the Belts be subjected to any detention or hindrance.” Additional information is available in the Netherlands Institute for the Law of the Sea publication, *The Regime of Passage Through the Danish Straits*.

Transit of the Danish Straits is subject to specific recommendations by IMO SN.1/Circ.263 23 October 2007 (page 8) *Amendments to the Recommendation on Navigation through the Entrances to the Baltic Sea*. Companies should consider these recommendations when planning a transit through the Danish Straits and the Baltic entrances.

## 2.2 Route T

### 2.2.1 General features

The features of the Danish Straits from Skagen to Bornholm or vice versa via Route T include:

- Narrow channels.
- Shallow water.
- Large turns (65° course alteration – Hatter Barn area).
- Traffic density.
- Density of population along the shoreline.

These features expose ships transiting to the risk of collision and grounding, with potentially serious consequences.

Route T is approximately 389 nautical miles long and at its narrowest point is 700m wide. It contains several large turns that require course alterations of up to 65°.

### 2.2.2 Depth of water

For deep draft ships, Route T is the only connection between the Baltic Sea and the North Sea/North Atlantic. It is a busy waterway. Sailing via the Skagerrak, Route T leads through the Kattegat, the Great Belt and the Western Baltic, passing through the shallow entrance to the Baltic Sea. The minimum depth on Route T is 16.5m north-east of Gedser in the northbound lane (north of buoy S78). The southbound lane has a maximum depth of 17m. Northbound ships can pass south of buoy S78, traffic permitting. The channel at this location is less than 900m wide.

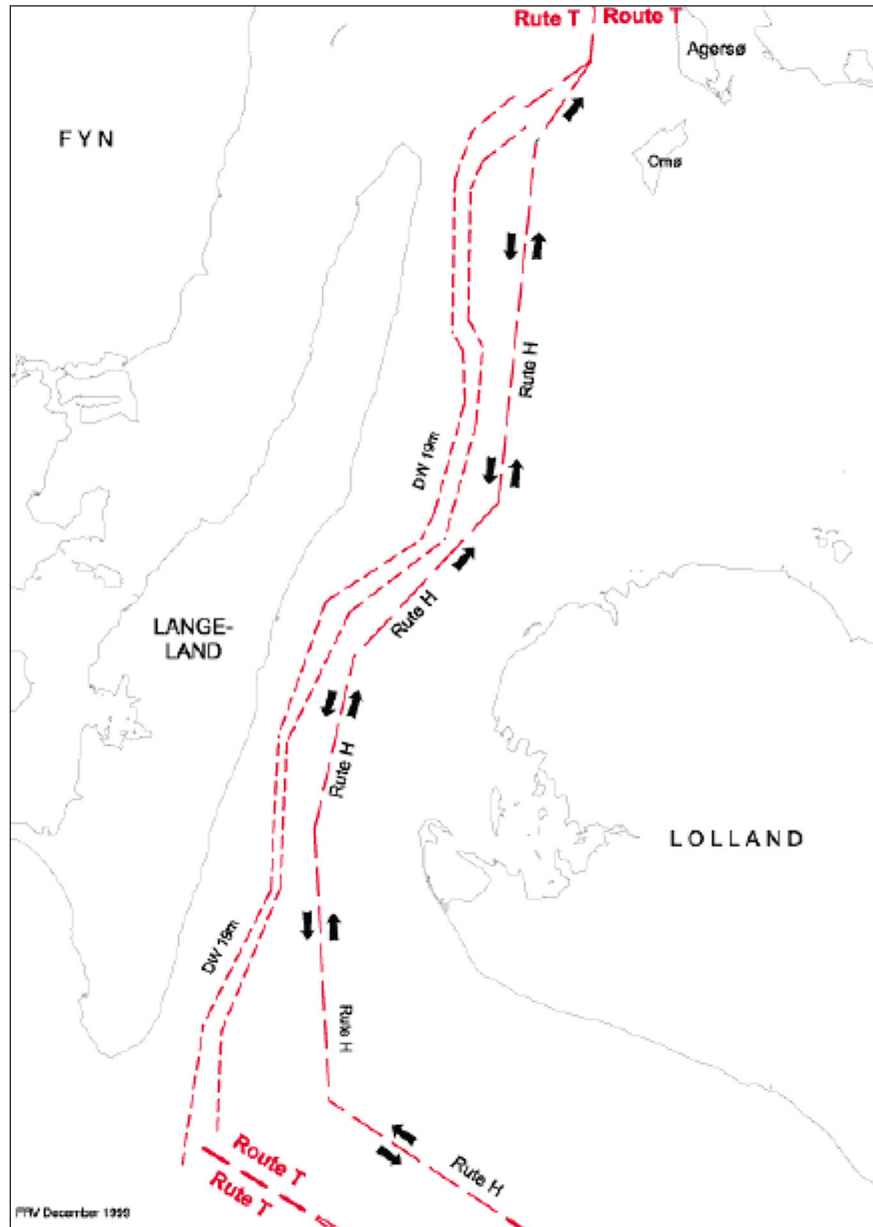
### 2.2.3 Draft limitations

IMO Resolution MSC.138(76) *Recommendation on Navigation Through the Entrances to the Baltic Sea* recommends a maximum draft of 15m for ships transiting the Great Belt using Route T southbound (Skagen–Bornholm) and northbound (Bornholm–Skagen). The Baltic and Danish Straits are brackish water. The water density varies depending on the locations. Water density in the Great Belt varies around 1015g/l.

Ships of less than 10m draft are recommended to transit the Great Belt using alternative routes as defined in the PPG and avoid using Route T.

Route T should be used by ships with a draft greater than 10m (see PPG).

1. Ships transiting with a draft between 7.7m and 10m are advised to use Route H through the Great Belt and pass clear of ships constrained by draft (see PPG). See figure 2.3.
2. The maximum draft for ships transiting through the Sound, which is the shortest entrance to the Baltic, is 7.7m. Ships with a draft of 7.7m or less usually use this route and avoid Route T.



**Figure 2.3:** Ships transiting with a draft between 7.7m and 10m are advised to use Route H. Source: DEMA Navigation through Danish Water version 16.0 (FEB 2025)

**2.2.4 Air draft**

Route T passes under the Great Belt Bridge, which requires an air draft of less than 65m (mean sea level) in the centre of the channel, decreasing outward to the edge.

Except for ships draft and air draft, there is no limitation on ship size when transiting the Danish Straits. Ship characteristics including overall length, beam, draft, air draft and manoeuvring characteristics should be considered when carrying out the risk assessment.

**2.2.5 Tide and currents**

Tidal ranges in the Baltic Sea are extremely low. In the Kattegat area, the average tidal range is between 10 and 30cm on the Danish coast and 4cm on the Swedish coast, with higher amplitudes observed during spring tides. However, the sea level may vary significantly during periods of strong and steady winds or with the variation of air pressure. Refer to HELCOM for additional information.

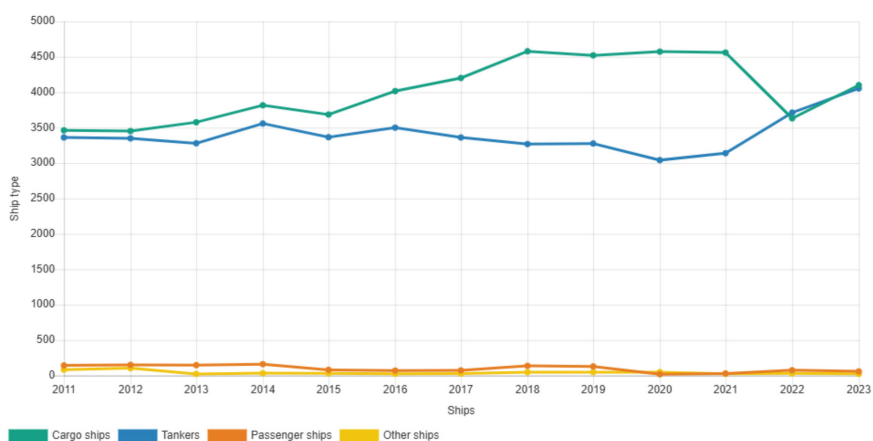
Currents in the Danish Straits can be strong and varied in direction. The general surface current flows from the south, outbound from the Baltic. Strong winds can weaken or even reverse the surface current. During the summer, west winds are prevailing and inbound current can be experienced in the channels.

For sea level, currents, salinity (density), wind, sea state and ice, the Danish Meteorological Institute (DMI) provides information and forecasts: <https://ocean.dmi.dk/english/index.php> and <https://ocean.dmi.dk/anim/index.uk.php>.

### 2.2.6 Traffic

Statistical data from the DMA shows a marked increase in maritime traffic in the Baltic Sea region over the past decade (see figure 2.4). This growth has increased the likelihood of maritime incidents and marine pollution. The average size of ships and cargo carried has also steadily increased, adding to the overall level of risk.

On average, 27,000 commercial ships per year transit through the Great Belt and 7,500 per year (more than 8,000 in 2023) do the full transit (Skagen-Bornholm in and out), averaging 20 ships per day, with about half being oil tankers or gas carriers. Large ships can be encountered in the narrow part of the channels. In summer, large numbers of sailing boats can be encountered in some parts of the Danish Straits.



**Figure 2.4:** Number of ships passing the Great Belt, 2011-2023.

Source: Navigation statistics for the Great Belt (DMA)

<https://www.dma.dk/safety-at-sea/navigational-information/ais-data/transit-routes>

### 2.2.7 Traffic Separation Scheme, Vessel Traffic Service and reporting systems

There are several Traffic Separation Schemes (TSS) along Route T (from north to south: TSS Skagen West, TSS Skagen East, TSS at Hatter Barn, TSS between Korsoer and Sprogø, TSS south of Gedser and others eastern (TSS North Rugen, TSS in Bornholmsgat).

A mandatory ship reporting system named BELTREP is in place in the Great Belt traffic area. Reports should be made to Great Belt Vessel Traffic Service (VTS) using Very High Frequency (VHF) voice transmissions. Reporting requirements are recommended to be made by updated Automatic Identification System (AIS) information and by non-verbal means including e-mail, before entering the ship reporting area. Additionally, ships are required to call Belt Traffic, using VHF when entering the reporting area.

South of the Great Belt, a joint Danish-German VTS monitors the Fehmarnbelt area, which includes the offshore construction site of the Fehmarnbelt Tunnel between Danish and German territory. Ships passing the Fehmarnbelt on Route T are recommended to participate in VTS Fehmarnbelt and give notice to VTS Fehmarnbelt when entering the VTS area.

Further east is the Kadetrenden VTS, for which no verbal reports are required; reporting data is collected using AIS data. The geographical area covered by the Kadetrenden VTS can be seen at [http://wp12183585.server-he.de/npubwiki/wiki/images/2/2f/S123\\_VTS\\_Warnem%C3%BCnde.pdf](http://wp12183585.server-he.de/npubwiki/wiki/images/2/2f/S123_VTS_Warnem%C3%BCnde.pdf).

### 2.2.8 Weather

It is recommended that ships monitor weather forecasts and include details of wind direction and current flow in their passage plan. Restricted visibility is possible during the passage, so parallel indexes, clearing bearings and ranges and contingency anchorages should be identified.

For wind, sea state and ice, the Danish Meteorological Institute (DMI) provides information and forecasts <https://ocean.dmi.dk/english/index.php> and metocean model graphics <https://ocean.dmi.dk/anim/index.uk.php>.

Lyngby Radio broadcasts weather forecasts on request via VHF 16. Additionally, weather warnings are broadcast on VHF 16.

## 2.3 Arrangement before transit

### 2.3.1 Passage planning

The following publications include information on reporting systems, TSS, VTS, pilotage, charts, notices to mariners, dangerous cargoes including oil, chemicals and gases, ice and weather reports, and areas with local traffic (ferries, leisure crafts – seasonal) and should be referred to when compiling the ship's passage plan:

- A transit plan should follow the IMO SN.1/Circ.263 23 October 2007 (page 8) *Amendments to the Recommendation on Navigation through the Entrances to the Baltic Sea*, considering the information and best practices provided in *Bridge Procedures Guide* (ICS).
- *Navigation through Danish Waters* (DMA) presents information on navigation in Danish waters including the transit Route T.
- *Passage Planning Guide, Baltic Sea: Skagen to Bornholm* (BIMCO, DanPilot, Witherbys).

The passage plan should be prepared as detailed in the ship operator's Safety Management System (SMS). Masters should identify the most critical areas, especially between north of Sjaellands (W cardinal buoy of Lysegrund) and north of Kap Arkona (Germany) including:

- Vengeance Ground.
- Hatter Barn.
- Great Belt Bridge.
- Langeland Belt.
- Gedser.

A Master/Pilot exchange should take place before the transit starts.

### 2.3.2 Supporting the bridge team

For ships transiting the Baltic Straits, this guide strongly supports the IMO recommendation that a pilot(s) should be embarked and assist for the entire transit.

For ships planning to transit the Danish Straits and arriving or departing via the English Channel, the use of a deep-sea pilot for pilotage throughout the English Channel is recommended.

Owners/operators of ships should review the bridge team manning on board and consider embarking an additional senior navigating officer or navigating officer in advance, to help manage hours of work and rest in maintaining a safe navigational watch in restricted waters.

### 2.3.3 Pilotage

Pilotage is recommended by the IMO *Recommendation on Navigation Through the Entrances to the Baltic Sea* and IMO SN.1/Circ.263 23 October 2007 (page 8) *Amendments to the Recommendation on Navigation through the Entrances to the Baltic Sea*.

The IMO recommends that ships with a draft of 11 metres or more should:

- Use the local pilotage services provided by the coastal states.
- Be aware that anchoring may be necessary owing to the weather and sea conditions in relation to the size and draft of the ship and the sea level. In this respect consider the information available from the pilot and from radio navigation information services in the area.

Danish licensed pilots provide the service. Eighteen hours' minimum notice should be given, when requesting a pilot. Danish pilot assistance is available from/to Skagen to Allinge on the island of Bornholm (Baltic Sea).

For large tankers (VLCCs, Suezmax) and liquefied natural gas carriers a non-stop pilot arrangement is recommended for the passage from Skagen to Bornholm in both directions. In this case, two pilots embark the ship at the first pilot station and remain onboard until completion of the transit. They usually keep a six on, six off watch on the bridge. This will avoid stopping or slowing down, to exchange pilots.

#### **2.3.4 Planning for the transit**

- Pre-transit meeting (toolbox meeting) should be conducted by the ship management team.
- A bridge team management meeting should be conducted to plan and agree on pre-arrival tests, bridge watchkeeping arrangements, engine manning and deck/engine crew arrangements for the transit.
- As detailed in the *IMO Recommendation on Navigation Through the Entrances to the Baltic Sea*, anchoring may be necessary. Planning should be made for an anchoring team to be mobilised in addition to the manning of the bridge and for a check that the anchoring equipment is ready for use. This should address safety and operational matters, the anchoring plan and the risks and precautions necessary to carry out emergency anchoring safely.
- Crew relief requirements, service and stores should be planned and considered as early as the previous port call(s) to consider work/rest hour management, handover periods and experience of onboard personnel.
- Fatigue management and rest hours planning should ensure that the Master, officers, engineers and ratings who will be on duty during the transit are well rested before its commencement. If necessary and in cooperation with shore management, Masters should consider resting the crew at safe anchorage – or other safe location – before the transit, to ensure that bridge and engine watchkeepers are fit for duty during the Danish Strait passage.
- The steering system and main engine manoeuvrability should be fully operational and tested to verify full functionality before the transit.
- Local and emergency steering procedures should be exercised before entering the area and all personnel should be familiar with emergency steering procedures.
- The engine room team should exercise manoeuvring of the main engine on local control, before the transit.
- When conducting pre-arrival steering and engine manoeuvring tests, due regard should be given to other traffic, proximity of the shore and the overall navigational situation to ensure no additional risks are introduced through these tests. Tests should be undertaken only when it is safe to do so and at a distance considered by the Master as safely away from the coast, navigational dangers and shallow waters.

## 3 Recommendations for transiting the Danish Straits

### 3.1 Bridge and engine room manning

It is recommended that senior navigating officers have suitable experience and knowledge of transiting the Danish Straits. Where there is no experience of transiting the Danish Straits, the ship's shore management should be actively involved in reviewing the passage plan and ensuring the crew understands the navigational risks involved. Considerations to increase the level of officers' familiarisation and readiness might include the following:

- Participation in a relevant marine video training programme, if available.
- Remote briefing on safe passage.
- Briefing call by marine manager(s) or marine shore expert with local knowledge or Danish Straits transit experience.

The minimum bridge and engine management team at critical areas of transit, as identified in the passage plan (see section 2.3.1), should follow the manning requirements as stated in the ship's SMS. However, it is recommended that the manning consists of the following:

- On the bridge – the Master, an officer of the watch, a helmsman and a lookout, in addition to the pilot.
- In the engine room – a senior engineer, a watchkeeping engineer and one engine room rating, irrespective of the ship's class society automation notation.

Due to high workload and high recommended manning level, companies should evaluate the need for an extra officer or engineer to be embarked for the transit to ensure sufficient and well rested personnel are available to handle the duty tasks and emergencies.

### 3.2 Navigation

- Navigational best practices should be followed with respect to position fixing, position verification, parallel indexing, clearing bearings and ranges.
- As recommended by IMO SN.1/Circ.263 23 October 2007 (page 8) *Amendments to the Recommendation on Navigation through the Entrances to the Baltic Sea*, shipowners and masters should consider the full potential of navigation equipment, including the Electronic Chart Display and Information System (ECDIS) when navigating these narrow waters.
- Consideration should be given to the use of radar overlay on ECDIS, selection of no-go areas/safety contour, the display of AIS information and the use of parallel indexing to monitor the ship's progress against the passage plan.
- Ships should be suitably trimmed to optimise manoeuvrability during transit.
- There have been instances of ships encountering Global Navigational Satellite Systems (GNSS) jamming and spoofing in the Baltic Sea region. Ship's bridge teams should be aware of procedures to be followed in case the GNSS signal is unreliable or not available. The ship's position should be cross-checked using visual bearings, radar positioning and radar overlay/underlay on ECDIS.
- ECDIS displaying electronic charts for the area as well as interface with the ship's position via GNSS and targets acquired by the radar Automatic Radar Plotting Aid (ARPA) should be set with alarms (e.g. depth contour, no go area). On each ECDIS, the settings and alarm settings should be checked and known.

### 3.3 Ship manoeuvrability

Ships navigating sharp turns with the current from astern will tend to overshoot the bends and can drift out beyond the channel centreline. With the current astern, the bow and stern of long ships may be in different current regimes when they negotiate a sharp bend. This may lead to the stern being swept out from the centre of the channel and consequently, the bow swinging in towards the shore, on the inside of the bend. ECDIS wheel-over position and rate of turn utilities should be applied to aid this. Sharp visual lookout and ship observation by the conning officer is a must to ensure ship handling is timely conducted and position constantly maintained within the channel.

Ships navigating against a strong current will set rapidly to one side or the other if the ship develops a significant angle to the current. Care should be taken to ensure a suitable track and adequate clearance from the grounding line when approaching the points forming the inside of sharp bends.

### 3.4 Engine and critical equipment readiness

- The main engine should always be available for manoeuvring throughout the transit.
- Steering configuration should ensure maximum redundancy and duplication are available.
- Electrical power configuration: Ships should follow the requirements of their SMS with regards to electrical power availability. The following is recommended:
  - At least two auxiliary generators must be in service during the transit. Each generator should have the capacity to supply the anticipated maximum electrical load during the transit.
  - Failure of either generator should not compromise the normal propulsion, steering or other critical systems.
- For ships equipped with thruster(s), they should be tested before transit and be available for use during the transit.
- Unless necessary, the engine/steering/power/fuel supply configuration should not be changed during the transit of the Danish Straits. Routine maintenance should be undertaken 24 hours before transit to avoid risk of machinery failure.
- Compressed air bottles should be maintained at nominal capacity and air compressors be in good order to refill air start bottles, where applicable.
- When access in the steering flat from the engine room is difficult, at critical areas of the transit, a qualified member of the engineering staff with understanding of emergency steering procedures should be stationed in the steering gear room.

### 3.5 Cargo system

- Cargo and ballast operations including ballast transfer, tank cleaning or gas freeing should not be undertaken during transit and all cargo and ballast tank lids should be secured.
- Cargo tanks should be inerted and maintained inert throughout the passage and where fitted, the inert gas system should be operational.

## **4 Emergency services**

### **4.1 Emergency response capabilities**

Denmark's emergency services are organised as per IMO provision with a Joint Rescue Co-ordination Centre and a Search and Rescue Co-operation Plan.

Maritime and personnel accidents should be reported immediately to the DMA. The DMA requires that "The ship's master and shipowner should ensure that the DMA is notified immediately via telephone if a maritime accident, incident at sea or a death occurs on a Danish ship or a foreign ship in Danish territorial waters."

Ship to Ship (STS) transfer equipment is not available in the Danish Straits. However, STS service providers maintain equipment for operations involving all sizes of ships, including large tankers, at Skagen, the north entrance of the Danish Straits.

Denmark, Germany, Norway and Sweden have all ratified the 1992 International Oil Pollution Compensation (IOPC) Fund and the 2003 Supplementary Fund.

### **4.2 Salvage, assistance and firefighting**

Dedicated salvage and towing resources are not available within or near the Straits. However, harbour tugs, some equipped with firefighting capabilities, are stationed at ports along the Straits.

At the time of writing, in connection with the Fehmarn Belt tunnel project (expected to complete in 2030), there is an interim arrangement to protect the area. A contract for maritime rescue services in the Baltic Sea has been awarded by the German Federal Waterways and Shipping Administration. As part of the contract, an AHTS operates out of the Port of Sassnitz on the island of Rügen, from where emergency rescue operations can be launched.

Ocean anchor handling tugs serving the offshore petroleum industry are available on the west Norwegian coast or in the North Sea. Salvage or assistance will depend on mobilisation time of these units.



**Our vision**

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