



PIB – an urgent review needed

Joint statement between environmental NGOs and the UK Chamber of Shipping

We have been extremely saddened by the terrible scenes of thousands of seabirds washing up dead or dying along the south west coast of England in recent months, covered in the man-made sticky substance polyisobutene¹ (PIB). We pay tribute to the immense efforts of those involved locally in responding to these incidents.

The Maritime and Coastguard Agency (MCA) are currently investigating the cause and culprit of these incidents. If it is confirmed that this disaster was the result of illegal activity, the UK Government and IMO should ensure there is no obstacle to prevent those responsible from being brought to justice.

PIB is clearly a hazardous substance, which has no proper place in our precious oceans and seas. Its transportation and consumption, however, is predicted to increase significantly in coming years, given its widespread use in a range of products from chewing gum to industrial sealants.

It is currently legal to discharge PIB at sea, with conditions, under the international MARPOL Convention², after tanks have been pre-washed at port reception facilities. Up to 100 litres³ can be legally released in each tank discharge, depending on the age of the ship. However, the impacts of PIB on marine ecosystems, and the amount of PIB released routinely as part of legal shipping operations, are not well known or understood.⁴

The shipping and ports industries have made great advances in the transportation and handling of chemical and non-oil products in recent years. All of us are all supportive of fair and effective regulations on the release of these potentially harmful substances, based on the testing of substances for their full range of environmental impacts.

As such, we strongly support an urgent review of the hazard classification status of PIB under Annex II of MARPOL, in order to ensure that the risks of releasing PIB into the marine environment are fully understood. This should involve the testing of PIB in realistic marine conditions, including in combination with permitted cleaning agents, considering the potential long-term effects upon the wider marine ecosystem of regular small-scale releases.

Should such a review conclude that PIB should be reclassified⁵ to prevent its discharge and require its total removal at shore-based facilities, all sides would be supportive of such a move. We urge the UK Government to take a lead in ensuring this important matter is taken forward as a matter of urgency.

¹ Alternatively known as polyisobutylene, or butyl rubber, comprising a set of substances under the formula (C₄H₈)_n

² The International Convention for the Prevention of Pollution from Ships (MARPOL) covering prevention of pollution of the marine environment by ships from operational or accidental causes

³ + 50 litres tolerance for ships built between 1986 and 2007. For any ships built pre-1986, the limit is 300 litres +50 litres tolerance.

⁴ For a summary of best available knowledge on the environmental impacts of non-oil substances, see Chapter 5 (pp. 52-63) of Rose et al. (2011) at <http://www.marineboard.eu/images/publications/Monitoring%20Chemical%20Pollution-71.pdf>

⁵ From a Category Y to Category X substance under Annex II of the MARPOL Convention, as agreed through the procedures of the International Maritime Organisation (IMO), treating PIB as a major hazard that justifies prohibiting its discharge in any quantity at sea