



Container lines back using current weighing process to meet SOLAS

(VIA JOC.com)

U.S. exporters finally achieved the carrier uniformity they were seeking on the SOLAS container weighing requirement when 19 major container serving the U.S. gave their support for the use of on-terminal scales to comply with the international rule that takes effect on July 1.

The Ocean Carrier Equipment Management Association, which represents 19 of the largest container lines in the U.S. trades, stated that it “strongly supports the use of on-terminal scales to obtain the verified gross mass of containers, as required by the Convention on Safety of Life at Sea.”

The OCEMA announcement is significant because it should allay the concerns of exporters that each line would attempt to impose its own requirements on customers for submitting a VGM. Furthermore, since U.S. ports and terminal operators for years have been using on-terminal truck scales to weigh containers in order to meet Occupational Safety and Health Administration safety requirements, exporters can feel comfortable in knowing that there will be no process changes or delays in the loading of their containerized shipments onto vessels.

“While this is expected to alleviate much of the confusion surrounding VGM and simplify the process for most stakeholders, there may be operational constraints that require different processes for determining and transmitting VGM,” OCEMA said in a statement. “In cases where the Terminal Weighing Approach is not feasible, OCEMA will continue to evaluate ways to achieve VGM compliance.”

Under the International Maritime Organization’s Safety of Life at Sea amendment, passed in May 2014, container lines are obliged to only load containers with a VGM onto a ship. The rule is aimed at cracking down on misdeclared container weights, which have contributed to maritime accidents.

Agricultural exporters meeting in Long Beach at the weekend, three days before the OCEMA terminal-weighing approach was announced, had expressed concerns about a lack of uniformity among the almost two-dozen major container lines in the U.S. trades.

Peter Friedmann, executive director of the Agriculture Transportation Coalition, said as recently as last week AgTC member companies had been receiving disparate messages from individual carriers as to whether the use of terminal scales was acceptable, or whether the exporters had to sign off on the weights that had been provided by the ports or terminal operators to the shipping lines at the time of loading onto the vessel.



The South Carolina Ports Authority, which operates the marine terminals in Charleston, took the lead among port authorities back in February when Jim Newsome, president and chief executive officer, said Charleston would continue to weigh the combination truck-container units at its in-gates, as it had been doing for the past 25 years, and would provide the weight to the shipping line for use in calculating the VGM.

Newsome told the AgTC conference that exporters at the Port of Charleston will not have to sign each VGM separately. "We will file a tariff rule. The shipper using our port authorizes us to submit the VGM," Newsome said.

Charleston is one of a half-dozen South Atlantic and Gulf Coast ports that have filed for permission from the Federal Maritime Commission to form a discussion agreement through which they will develop a uniform approach on the VGM requirements, further assuring exporters that processes will be uniform from port to port in the region.

The OCEMA announcement that carriers will accept on-terminal weighing as fulfilling the International Maritime Organization's SOLAS requirement is important because the regulation specifically states that the shipper is responsible for assuring that the VGM is submitted to the ocean carrier. However, thanks to an "equivalency" declaration by the U.S. Coast Guard, which states that there are a variety of paths to comply with SOLAS, it became clear that a third party could submit the VGM on behalf of the exporter. The Coast Guard is the U.S. enforcement agency for the SOLAS regulation.

Ocean carrier executives realize that in their industry, where company headquarters are scattered throughout Asia and North America, mixed messages were being delivered to U.S. exporters. Richard Craig, CEO of MOL America, said that in the U.S. trades carriers were working with OCEMA on developing a common approach. The process took some time, but exporters should now be assured that carriers all support the OCEMA terminal weighing approach. "We're in full agreement here," Craig said.

George Goldman, president of Zim Integrated Shipping Services America, said the common approach of carriers on the terminal-weighing process should also relieve exporters of the fear that carriers would each go their own way on SOLAS in order to seek a competitive advantage. "It is not in our best interest, or yours, to go off on a competitive binge," Goldman said.

Bill Mongelluzzo, Senior Editor | Jun 20, 2016 2:57PM EDT