Deepening and Widening of the River Elbe Delayed

As early as 2002 preliminary studies for further deepening and widening of the navigation channel on the river Elbe started. According to the increasing number and size of ships, the need for advanced maneuvering room had already been obvious. But back then the port industry thought about 350m long and 40m wide ships. Whereas nowadays, the biggest cargo ships measure a size of 400m length and 60m width.

Back in July 2014 the Federal Administrative Court (FAC) heard the case against the dredging of the river Elbe. The environmental associations BUND and Nabu consider the deepening of the Elbe to be dispensable. Moreover there are concerns whether dredging might cause a collapse of the ecosystem. In fact the European Water Framework Directive plays an important role at that point due to prohibiting deterioration of waters.

The city of Hamburg aims at enabling cargo ships with a maximum draught of 13,5 meters to reach the port tide-independently. Indeed, giant cargo ships that draw 14,5 meters shall also be able to pass the Elbe tide-dependently. Therefore, efforts on deepening and widening the Elbe support maintaining the competitiveness of port Hamburg.

Latest developments and reactions

The FAC postponed its decision on the dredging the Elbe last Thursday 2nd Oktober 2014. With reference to a similar case, concerning the dredging of river Weser, the judges await the decision of the European Court of Justice on questions that raised up in 2013 and affect the construction of laws and rules of the European Water Framework Directive as well.

Numerous entrepreneurs consider this postponement as a threat for the business location Hamburg. They are concerned about Hamburg’s position as an international hub. Mr. Hans Fabian Kruse, president of the Federation of wholesale and foreign traders (AGA) said “When there is no solution until 2016, many things will take a turn for the worse at the port.” Shipping companies would divert their cargo ships and transshipment could halve.

Whereas the political party Christian Democratic Union (CDU) of Hamburg advises against linking the port’s welfare to only one single fact. Indeed they eagerly advocate this project. But, according to its faction leader Mr. Dietrich Wersiche, the future of port Hamburg be rather dependent of multiple decisions, which the CDU presented in their concept on “Hafen Hamburg 2030”.

Statement by the Port Hamburg Marketing and Executive Board Members Axel Mattern and Ingo Egloff on the Federal Administrative Court’s Decision

“We respect the decision announced today by the Federal Administrative Court (FAC) in Leipzig on the deepening and widening of the navigation channel on the Lower and Outer Elbe. A final decision can only be taken when the European Court of Justice (ECJ) has clarified questions still outstanding on the so-called prohibition of deterioration and desirability of improvement embodied in the European Water Framework Directive. These questions will be resolved by spring 2015 in connection with complaints against a deepening of the River Weser.”
The FAC also emphasized, however, that while the environmental compatibility assessments in respect of the fauna/flora done for the planning approval for the deepening of the navigation channel of the Lower and Outer Elbe exhibit various shortcomings, in its opinion these can be overcome and should not lead to a lifting of the said approval.

We regret that once again time will be lost and that no decisive relaxation of the restrictions of ship draft and breadth currently in force can yet be implemented. More than ten years of planning and authorization procedures have been a difficult time for the port’s customers, shipping companies and firms operating in the port. The primary objective remains the rapid and carefully implementation of expansion measures. With seaborne cargo throughput of more than 140 million tons and annual container handling of over 9,000,000 TEU, Hamburg is the Northern European hub optimally located for handling worldwide cargo flows and transport chains in seaborne foreign trade. Against the background of an increasing number of calls by mega-ships, access from the sea via the Elbe is of vital importance for the Port of Hamburg and the companies based there and in the Hamburg Metropolitan Region. More than 150,000 jobs are linked with the port. Distinctly improved accessibility is also urgently needed for all those industrial and trading concerns engaged in worldwide foreign trade that use Germany’s largest universal port for their exports and imports."

Finally the Hamburg port’s future depends on the ECJ’s decision on the construction of laws of the European Water Framework Directive which is expected for the first half-year of 2015. Thus the dredging works on the Elbe, that actually should start in 2016, will probably not be launched before 2017. Hamburg hopes for a positive outcome to reinsure a prosperous future for its metropolitan region.

Sources: Hamburger Abendblatt, Port of Hamburg