

FLYER TO THE LEISURE BOATING SECTOR

ECC Topaz: Fire and subsequent foundering 11nm off Lowestoft, 14 January 2014



Figure 1: *ECC Topaz* on fire (inset: subsequent foundering)

Narrative

On 14 January 2014, at approximately 1230, the 14m wind farm support catamaran, *ECC Topaz*, caught fire off the coast of Lowestoft. The fire is thought to have originated in a compartment in the starboard hull directly under the wheelhouse. The skipper became aware of the fire when he saw smoke coming out of the heating air outlet vents. Within seconds, the fire had broken through into the wheelhouse and spread rapidly throughout the vessel's GRP structure.

Although the vessel could carry a maximum of 14 people, there were only three crew members on board on the day of the accident. Due to its rapid spread through the vessel, the crew were not able to extinguish the fire and were forced to abandon the vessel to a liferaft, from which they were airlifted to safety. The burnt out wreck of the vessel sank at 1420.

A few days after the accident, the MAIB received information from the owners of similar workboats stating that charring to the underside of the wooden deck through which an uninsulated section of a diesel fired air heater exhaust pipe was routed had been noted (**Figure 2**). Further investigation identified that it also was possible that *ECC Topaz's* exhaust pipe might have deteriorated, allowing hot exhaust gases to impinge directly onto the wooden deck above or flammable substances stored in the heater compartment. These included drums of diesel and lubricating oils, sacks of rags and paper rolls.



Figure 2: Scorching of the plywood underdeck on a similar vessel

Safety Lessons

Uninsulated exhausts from air heaters can reach temperatures well above the auto ignition temperature of many flammable materials including plywood, wood, paper and cotton. Therefore, any contact between either exhaust gases or uninsulated exhaust pipes and these materials has the potential to start a fire.

To ensure that your vessel is not at risk from this hazard:

- Check that all the exhaust systems on your vessel are adequately lagged.
- Inspect the exhaust pipes frequently for signs of deterioration and replace them if required.
- Follow the inspection and maintenance schedule for your vessel's air heaters as required by the manufacturer.
- Do not store flammable material in the heater compartment.

This flyer and the MAIB's investigation report are posted on our website:

www.maib.gov.uk

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