

There are two principal elements to the issue of red diesel and EU law: firstly, whether the continued availability of marked diesel in the UK for use in private pleasure craft complies with the EU Energy Products Directive and the EU Marking Directive and, secondly, whether it is lawful for member states to penalise individual yachtsmen for having marked diesel in their yachts' fuel tanks.

On the first element, we have sought specialist taxation law advice and we have been advised that the continued availability of marked diesel in the UK for use in private pleasure craft does not infringe either the EU Energy Products Directive or the EU Marking Directive. The specific issue relating to the EU Marking Directive (on the fiscal marking of gas oils and kerosene) turns on Article 3 of that Directive, which provides that "Member States shall take the necessary steps to ensure that improper use of the marked products is avoided". Article 3 goes on to suggest that the use of marked fuel for "combustion in the engine of a road-going motor vehicle" is to be regarded as "improper use" but no mention is made of use in private pleasure craft.

The key question is therefore whether the use of duty-paid marked diesel for propelling private pleasure craft amounts to "improper use" for the purposes of the Directive. The UK and Irish Governments take the view that the use of duty-paid marked diesel for propelling private pleasure craft does not amount to "improper use" (and there is no jurisprudence to the contrary) whereas the Belgian Government and individuals within the European Commission take the view that it does.

However, interpretation of EU Directives is the responsibility of the European Court of Justice, not the Commission, and it is certainly not the case that the European Court always supports the Commission's view. As such, the only way in which this question can be answered conclusively is for the matter to be referred to the European Court of Justice. The European Commission has taken the first steps towards such a referral by indicating that it intends to take infraction proceedings against the UK.

On the second element, my understanding is that the Belgian Government made it illegal to use marked diesel in private pleasure craft in Belgian waters shortly after the Belgian derogation from the Energy Products Directive expired in December 2006. However, there are a number of circumstances under EU law (including the Energy Products Directive itself) and international law (such as the 1990 Istanbul Convention on Temporary Admission) in which the main fuel tanks of a private pleasure craft navigating in Community waters might legitimately contain marked diesel. We have again sought specialist legal advice and we have been advised that the penalisation of individual yachtsmen for the mere presence of marked fuel in a pleasure craft's fuel tanks is contrary to the basic principles of EU law. This advice is consistent with the letter from the European Commission available on our website and this issue is not, as far as we are aware, the subject of the European Commission's infringement proceedings against the UK (the details of these proceedings being confidential between the Commission and the UK Government).

The RYA continues to lobby the European Commission and the Belgian Finance Ministry, both directly and through the European Boating Association. We are also working with colleagues in the Royal Belgian Yachting Federation, who are similarly lobbying their Government (the Belgian authorities are penalising Belgian yachtsmen who take on marked diesel perfectly legitimately outside the EU, such as in the US,

the Channel Islands or Norway). In addition, the RYA is supporting the UK Government's opposition to the European Commission's infraction proceedings. However, infraction proceedings can be protracted so, in the meantime, we are working with the UK Government to explore ways in which the Belgian Government might be persuaded not to penalise UK yachtsmen visiting Belgium for the mere presence of marked diesel in their yachts' fuel tanks.

Until this matter is resolved, though, it remains a risk that yachtsmen visiting Belgium and the Netherlands may be penalised for the mere presence of marked fuel in their yachts' fuel tanks.

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