

Shipowners doubt Galileo value Loss of service would make project cheaper

Neville Smith - Wednesday 13 February 2008

THE €3.4bn (\$4.9bn) cost of the Galileo satellite navigation system could be dramatically reduced by cutting the safety of life service, which the maritime and aerospace industries say they do not need.

Galileo, touted by the European Union as a vital strategic alternative to GPS, has been over-specified to provide functions that neither industry would use in practice, delegates at a London conference heard.

“Merchant shipping puts in what is regulated and no more,” said Comite International Radio-Maritime secretary-general Michael Rambaut.

“There’s nothing to say that in 10 years it won’t be allowed as a back-up, but GPS is established. Shipowners are unlikely to want to add to their costs.”

Satellite navigation is mentioned in Solas Chapter V as a required back-up system to traditional navigation, and also makes an appearance in recent amendments covering AIS and LRIT. But this means that owners might already have two GPS systems onboard, adding to redundancy, he added.

He identified a potential new application in portable satellite navigation units used by pilots. “In that case the unit will be coming up the side of the ship when the pilot comes aboard, perhaps for final approach.”

He said the annual newbuilding market of between 1,600-2,000 ships did not represent an attractive business for equipment manufacturers.

Delegates at a Royal Institute of Navigation conference, ‘Galileo: to be or not to be?’ heard a similar story from airline industry representatives.

While adding a comfort factor of more satellites, Galileo was a ‘nice-to-have’ for general navigation but not useful enough for take-off and landing procedures.

Conference chair Andy Norris and other RIN officials suggested that removing the search and rescue service would enable the European Commission to concentrate on the free public service where the market was growing, and shave millions of euros off the development costs.

Galileo’s role as a back-up to GPS has been further undermined by the recent start of an eLoran service in the UK and Ireland.

Mr Rambaut said one’s opinion comes down to perspective. “Glonass [the resurgent Russian satellite system] is certainly the cheapest. If you are a European politician you will back Galileo. As an engineer, I’d go for eLoran because there is no fighting for a share of the spectrum.”

He added that he was not aware that anyone in the maritime industry had requested an International Electrotechnical Commission test standard — the first stage of a class society type approval — for a Galileo receiver.

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