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Eric Johnson, Senior Technology Editor | Aug 04, 2022 12:35PM EDT

FMC Commissioner Carl Bentzel said the agency is intent on not "reinventing the wheel" by relying on existing data standards in the maritime sector. Photo credit: Shutterstock.com.

A US Federal Maritime Commission (FMC) initiative intended to align data-sharing among containerized supply chain parties will use data standards developed by the Digital Container Shipping Association (DCSA), FMC Commissioner Carl Bentzel signaled this week.

The FMC's Maritime Transport Data Initiative (MTDI), launched in November, was set up to catalogue maritime data elements for US inbound and outbound container flows, identify gaps in data definitions, and develop recommendations for common data standards and sharing policies. Those recommendations are due in the fall, Bentzel, who has led the initiative for the FMC, said in a Q&A with the DCSA provided to JOC.com Thursday.

The agency will lean on work already done by the association in order to not "reinvent the wheel" when it comes to choosing standards, Bentzel said.

"It is our intention to use much of what DCSA has done as a template for emerging national standards for intermodal maritime data, from point of origin to ultimate destination," he said. "DCSA standards provide an invaluable tool for achieving standardized, digital data communication in the industry."

The FMC initiative has involved 18 industry stakeholder meetings from November through May, with 80 participants from the maritime transportation industry, including container lines, shippers, forwarders, longshore unions, railroads, and technology solutions providers.

As Bentzel put it in the Q&A with the DCSA, "maritime logistics had a data communication problem." That problem was exposed in 2020, when demand dropped precipitously during the early onset of the COVID-19 pandemic and then recovered spectacularly later in the year, resulting in record US import volumes throughout 2021 and 2022.

Essentially, Bentzel theorized that constrictions in data flow between parties were hindering US ports' ability to deal with wild swings in container flows, he told JOC.com in a conversation in fall 2021, ahead of the start of the MTDI process.

"Tremendous amounts of data were being generated with no common data lexicon and no timely method for sharing it with other stakeholders engaged in moving the cargo and with the public," Bentzel said in the DCSA interview.

Leveraging existing standards development

The DCSA, a nonprofit consortium of nine container lines aiming to standardize key shipping processes, has been involved in the FMC fact-finding exercise from the start. Since its own inception in 2019, the association has developed a range of blueprints around container status messages, smart containers, just-in-time vessel call optimization, port facility codes, and electronic bills of lading. All of the standards are open source, meaning they're intended to be publicly available for developers to use.

The broader goal is to make it easier for shipping line customers to work interchangeably across carriers, while also enabling carriers to build differentiated products and services on top of cross-carrier standards. DSCA members include Mediterranean Shipping Co., Maersk, CMA CGM, Hapag-Lloyd, ONE, Evergreen Line, HMM, Yang Ming, and Zim Integrated Shipping Services.

The FMC will use feedback gathered from a summit it held June 1, where it shared findings from the 18 meetings, combined with existing DCSA-developed data standards, to provide a set of recommendations in the fall, Bentzel said.

"Throughout the initial MTDI meetings, it was emphasized that it is critical to have data definitions developed and vetted across stakeholders," Bentzel said. "DCSA's standards fit these criteria, along with information collected by US Customs and Border Protection [CBP] and the US Coast Guard. Our intention is to use what already exists and works in practice."

The use of CBP data as an existing standard for the FMC initiative was suggested late last year by Bryn Heimbeck, CEO of logistics technology provider TradeTech.

"The data for 100 percent of the shipments entering US port terminals is available within CBP's ACE [automated commercial environment] system today," Heimbeck told JOC.com in December. "This data can, and should be, easily used by the importers and their third-party logistics providers to plan the pickup of the containers well in advance of the vessel arrival."

Bentzel said that container lines should be mindful that there is "a strong will in the US to find a solution to the issues facing maritime transportation. Common data standards are crucial to this effort, and by actively participating, every stakeholder can help ensure that the standards work for them."

Those sentiments echo what DCSA CEO Thomas Bagge said in a January JOC webcast about maritime data standardization, where he lamented that adoption of DCSA standards by its own members had been "disappointingly low." He urged shippers to put pressure on container lines to adopt the standards that the lines, by financially supporting the DCSA, had effectively paid to develop.

Bentzel called on ocean carriers to use those standards to send a message they want to improve US containerized supply chain operations.

"Be active participants in the digital transformation of your industry," Bentzel said to carriers. "Promote the need for standardization and adopt DCSA standards at scale. You have to be in it together, otherwise adding another 100 ships will just mean more ships are waiting out at sea to enter the US."

That the FMC is relying on DCSA-developed standards is sign that some of the murkiness around competing public and private data initiatives to emerge the past year is starting to clear.

"Truth be told, everyone has to adopt in order for them to become standards, either through regulation or market forces," Bentzel said.

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