



## Turning the tide on cargo fires

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Cargo safety was impossible to ignore in 2025. Major ship fires have again made headlines, reminding us that every incident is first and foremost a threat to people.

The data behind those headlines is sobering. Allianz has reported that ship fires are now at their highest level in more than a decade. Misdeclared dangerous goods are a leading cause of ship fires, reported as responsible for more than a quarter of all cargo-related incidents. For liner shipping that translates to a major shipboard fire roughly every 60 days, each one putting lives at risk and disrupting supply chains.

Inspection data underlines the scale of the problem. Reporting to the International Maritime Organization (IMO) by national authorities shows deficiencies in around 11 percent of inspected containers, including incorrect documentation and improper packing. Each of these deficiencies represents a potential spark for disaster. Misdeclared or undeclared dangerous goods are the common thread in many of the worst cases, as shipments enter the supply chain incorrectly documented or concealed, bypassing the safeguards that protect crews and vessels.

As an industry, we knew that individual actions alone would not be enough. So, together we took a big step in 2025 by launching the World Shipping Council Cargo Safety Program. At its core is a digital screening tool, powered by the National Cargo Bureau, that screens cargo data at the time of booking. Using keyword analysis, trade pattern recognition and machine learning, the system highlights bookings that may represent undeclared or misdeclared dangerous goods.

Carriers participating in the program – representing more than 75 percent of

global container capacity – are able to receive these alerts and can take action in accordance with their risk policies and procedures.

What makes this initiative significant is not only the technology, but the scale and standardisation behind it. That scale allows for shared algorithms, common inspection standards and a feedback system that incorporates lessons from real-world cases. As the system is used, it learns, refines and strengthens. Instead of isolated company efforts, the industry now has a coordinated, data-driven way to move dangerous goods risk management upstream.

We're talking millions and millions of container screenings that the whole industry can benefit from.

The launch of the WSC Cargo Safety Program has also drawn support from the wider risk and insurance community. The International Group of P&I Clubs welcomed the initiative as "an important step in enhancing safety in the carriage of containerised cargo by identifying the risks of misdeclared shipments," recognising its potential to protect vessels, seafarers and the marine environment, and supporting its adoption across the sector.

It is important to stress that the WSC Cargo Safety Program does not replace the legal obligation of shippers to declare dangerous goods accurately. That obligation is the cornerstone of safe shipping and is established in international law. What the program does is provide an additional layer of protection when that obligation is not met. It is a pragmatic acknowledgement that misdeclaration continues to occur at scale, and that the cost of inaction is measured not just in financial losses, but first and foremost in lives.

For seafarers, the stakes are personal and immediate. Too many have lost their lives to fires that began in containers packed far from the vessel, with goods declared in ways that obscured their risks. They should not be exposed to hazards they cannot see and cannot prepare for. By detecting risks earlier and standardising inspections, the WSC Cargo Safety Program gives crews a far better chance of avoiding these situations altogether.

Maritime risk has always been shared risk, and the WSC Cargo Safety Program reflects that reality. Carriers have taken the lead by investing in shared standards and technology. However, it is equally important that Governments enforce the rules consistently, and shippers and freight forwarders fulfil their obligations honestly and accurately.

Every container fire avoided is a life protected, a vessel saved, a cargo safely delivered and avoidance of potential harm to the marine environment. ▲