

# HATCH COVERS

CLAIMS v/s MAINTENANCE

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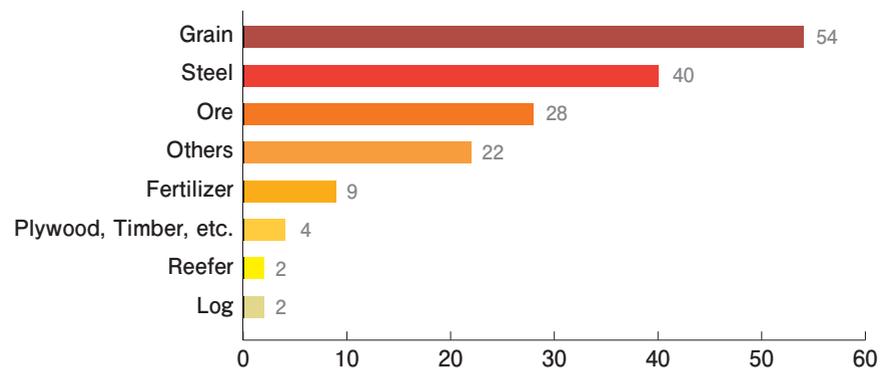
Chap.  
**01**

## INTRODUCTION



A recent study and claims analysis carried out by the Japan P&I club over a 5 year period between 2016PY and 2020PY shows that out of the 161 claims that were reported, 76% consisted of wetting damage to grain, steel and ore cargoes.

In 74 cases (46%), the sea water damage was caused by leaking hatch covers. This once again shows that hatch covers continue to generate seawater induced claims and that improperly maintained and leaky hatch covers have a high claim potential.



Graph 1 Number of Sea Water Damage on Bulk Carrier,General Cargo Vessel 2016PY-2020PY

When water susceptible cargo comes in contact with seawater during an ocean passage, it is most likely that a claim for wetting damage will be filed against the ship by the cargo owners/receivers.

These claims generally consist of a financial compensation for the damaged cargo, but indirect consequences associated with wetting damage claims, such as extra work for

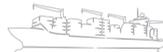
legal staff, survey costs, delays, sorting and reconditioning of the damaged cargo, unscheduled repairs to hatch covers, reputation damage, disruption of the ship's operational schedule, travel costs for superintendents, ... can be significant as well.

Whenever a claim for damage to 3rd party property is introduced, it is incumbent on the club to defend the owners' interests and successful settling will mainly depend on proving that the hatch covers were well maintained and that the shipowner and Master exercised due diligence to ensure that the hatch covers were in good condition at the outset of the voyage. It is sad to see that many of the claims filed for wetting damage could have been successfully defended and settled if only the owners and crew would have carried out basic hatch cover maintenance in line with good industry practice. The seas and oceans are a hostile environment and rigours of an ocean voyage should never be underestimated. Hatch covers are designed to withstand the perils of the sea but only when they are well maintained, they will be able to keep water out and cargoes dry.

Despite awareness campaigns in the past, hatch covers remain a major driver for wetting damage claims. Water infiltration may not only be a safety issue for the vessel and crew on board, but it also scuttles the business model of carrying goods by sea and should be avoided at all times.

The importance of correct hatch cover operation, maintenance and repairs cannot be emphasized enough. This loss prevention article, written by industry leading expert Mr. Walter Vervloesem (FNI) of IMCS bv (Belgium), will highlight key issues that should be well understood and observed in order to reduce exposure to ingress, wetting damage claims and to allow the club to defend your interest with success.

## Chap. 02 HISTORY OF HATCH COVERS

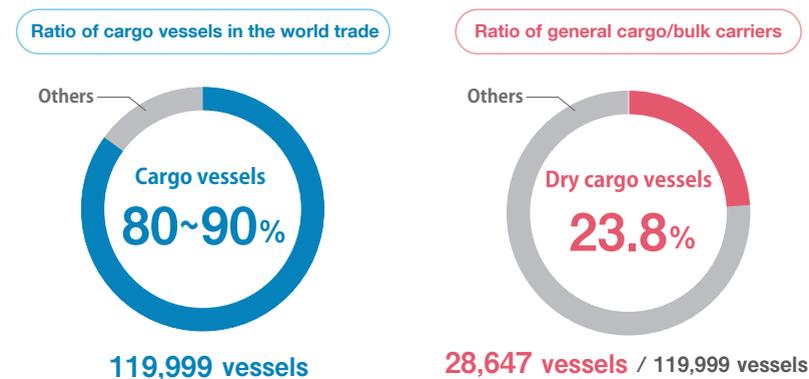


Since ancient times, different kinds of floating objects have been used for transporting goods over water. Initially trees, rafts and canoes were used, but gradually, and with the industrial revolutions over the last centuries, we have seen an evolution and transition from floating objects to wooden ships and more recently to steel vessels.

Over the last decades a wide variety of specialized and sophisticated ships appeared on the maritime scene in order to satisfy demand of world trade or to carry out specific marine tasks and operations.

The most commonly seen ships nowadays can be categorized as follows: container ships, bulk carriers, tankers, roll-on roll-off vessels, passenger/cruise vessels, offshore vessels, fishing vessels, speciality vessels, high-speed craft and dredgers.

Roughly 80-90% of the world trade is being done by a total of 119,999 cargo ships of which 28,647 ships (23.8%) consist of dry cargo vessels, i.e. general cargo ships and bulk carriers, which represent 38.2% of the gross tonnage of the worlds' fleet.



Graph 2 Type of vessels

Typically water sensitive cargoes like grain, steel, fertilizer, ores etc are transported on dry cargo vessels. In order to allow a swift intake and facilitate easy discharge of the above commodities, these vessels are equipped with hatch covers.

In case large amounts of water should penetrate the ship's hatch covers, both ship and crew could be in danger but limited water ingress would normally not cause a safety problem for the ship.

However, from a cargo quality point of view, even small amounts of water can ruin a cargo and cause commercial havoc. In general, one can say that the Class and statutory rules and associated inspections will mainly look to the safety of the vessel and crew. The industry (charterers, shippers, receivers, underwriters,...) will take statutory and class compliance for granted and will focus more on the commercial aspects of carrying goods by sea.

Whilst decades ago, only a few types of hatch covers were made, a wide variety of hatch covers were being developed to accommodate the requirements of specific ships, trades and cargoes. Nowadays, the most commonly seen types of hatch covers for general cargo ships, handysize, panamax and capesize bulk carriers consist of folding hatch covers (general cargo & handysize) and side rolling hatch covers (panamax & capesize). For container vessels we generally see that lift-away type pontoons are installed.



Ultimately it will be the shipowner who will decide, in concertation and dialogue with the shipyard, classification society, flag administration, customers,... which hatch cover type will suit the client's business model best and eventually hatch covers that are right for the ship, trade and cargo will be developed around a number of key parameters. Items that may influence the design are amongst others size of hatches, carriage of deck cargoes, strength requirements, available crew for preparing hatches to go to sea, opening/closing methods,.....

Hatch cover designs have evolved from vary basic and relatively lightweight designs to huge, heavy and moving pieces of equipment. Hatch covers are generally referred to as heavy-duty shipboard equipment and this is generally associated with material that can withstand rough handling and does not need constant care and maintenance. However, this is not true as modern hatch covers are high-tech equipment for which very small tolerances should be observed. Their maintenance is type-specific and their operation should be

considered a risk. Therefore, having a good understanding of how hatch covers work, and how to maintain and operate them is very important.

Cargo should not only be carried and delivered in time and in good condition but should also be transported in an environmental friendly manner. In view of the size and weight of hatch covers, many types are still operated by hydraulic systems which, in case of failure and associated spillage, have a pollution potential.

Only the combination of proper inspection, correct operation and regular maintenance of hatch covers will ensure that the goods loaded onboard ships can be transported in line with good industry standards.



Chap.

03

## RULES & REGULATIONS



In view of their impact on the safety of the ship and crew, hatch covers should comply with different rules and regulations imposed by Class, Flagstate (statutory) and Industry. As already pointed out in Chapter 2, Class will be working together with owners and shipyards during the development, design and manufacturing process and supervise installation of the hatch covers on board. Furthermore, the vast experience and knowledge from Class, reflected by the Class rules, will generally ensure that hatch covers can be type approved and, once installed, be in compliance with ruling regulations.

Throughout the in-service life of the ship, Class will carry out regular inspections to ensure that the approved design of the hatch covers has not been altered, modified or changed and that the hatch covers are still fit for duty. This could be the case when (temporary) repairs to the hatch covers were carried out by the crew after they suffered damage or when the crew thinks that so-called “improvements” should be made to facilitate or enhance operations, closing, sealing or securing.

Most shipboard staff are not aware of the fact that such modifications cannot be made without the consent of Class (and/or flag state) who previously approved the hatch cover design. Failing to bring repairs or modifications to the attention of the Classification society might result in Class being withdrawn (even post-factum in case of an incident).

In many cases, flag states will delegate their responsibility for inspections to Classification societies which will then be allowed to act as a “recognised organisation” and carry out tests and inspections required by the conventions to which the flag state is signatory party.

Conventions that are ratified by the flag state have to be included in the flag state's maritime law and as such they will become statutory instruments. Finally, and besides the Class and statutory requirements, which are both aimed to guarantee the ship's seaworthiness, there are also requirements that are imposed by industry players such as charterers, P&I clubs, transport insurers, vetting organisations,....

Industry requirements are based on the fact that a ship, once inspected and certified by the Class and flag state, will be compliant with Class and statutory rules and therefore technically fit and able to sail.

Extra requirements imposed by the industry will be focussing more on the commercial and quality aspects of the trade and might include requirements related to fumigation, ventilation, ultrasonic testing of hatch covers, cargo, cleanliness, ....



Photograph 1  
Hatch pontoon, fallen into  
cargo hold on bulldozer

Whilst safety of the ship is paramount, claims will seldom be introduced on grounds of unseaworthiness of the vessel but rather on non-compliance with the industry requirements or commercial related issues (cargoworthiness) such as leaking hatch covers (and wetting damage to cargo), condensation damage, delays for opening/closing hatch covers, stevedore damages,.....

Under the terms and conditions of a charter party, owners will be required to provide a seaworthy ship. A seaworthy ship is a ship that is technically fit (re-structure, certification, performance,...), cargoworthy (suitable to lift and transport the intended cargo) and fit to undertake the forthcoming voyage (incl. bunkers, crew, provisions, spare parts,...).

Practically speaking, and in case of cargo damage as a result from water ingress via

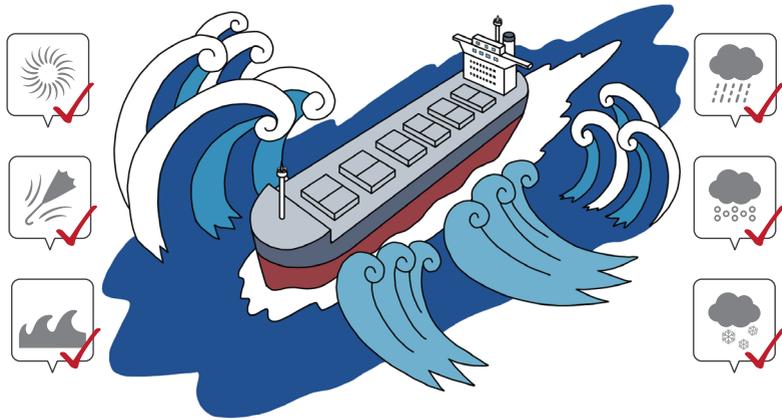
improperly maintained hatch covers, it will be concluded that the hatch covers were not such that the cargo could be transported without risk for damage and that therefore the ship was not seaworthy from a cargo carrying point of view. Such a verdict will usually be made after inspection and testing of the hatch covers and when it is proven that the hatch covers were indeed not in good condition at the outset of the voyage. In such a case, owners will be blamed of not having exercised due diligence.

### International convention on loadlines (ICLL):

With regards to the ship's hatch covers, the ICLL is first and foremost the most important convention. Loadlines and draft marks are normally used to determine how much cargo has been loaded which, from a commercial point of view (charter party and freight) is very important.

However, from a Loadline convention point of view, not the cargo loaded, but the freeboard (the part of the ship that is out of the water for a specific draft) is of paramount importance as it determines the ship's reserve buoyancy and safety. The more freeboard, the more reserve buoyancy the ship will have and the safer the ship will be. This is why the Loadline convention clearly states that *“The load line shall never be submerged at any time when the ship puts to sea, during the voyage or on arrival”* (Art. 12).

Under the Loadline convention, openings that are above the waterline are required to be weathertight. This actually means that water that is coming from the weatherside (such as green seas, sprays, rain,...) should not penetrate into the ship via these openings. If this should happen, water, and therefore weight (each m<sup>3</sup> of sea water weighs 1.025 ton), would be added to the ship which will cause the ship to be deeper in the water with less freeboard as a result. In order to prevent wateringress and be considered weathertight, the ICLL requires the closures of these weathertight openings to be structurally sound and strong, tight and well secured.



“Weathertight means that in any sea conditions water will not penetrate into the ship”  
(Reg. 3-12). (from the weatherside)

As the ship’s hatches are huge openings, which, in case of failure or leakage can admit substantial amounts of water to the ship’s holds, it is clear that every effort should be made to ensure that hatch covers are tight and will remain tight during the voyage.

Weathertight should not be confused with “watertight” as watertight means that “water will not pass through the sealing arrangements from both directions across the seal under a head of water” (in both directions). Therefore, a closure between two compartments below the waterline should normally be watertight. Watertight compartments are resistant to water pressure, as is the case during a major water ingress. Thanks to the “water-tight” closure, the leakage will not spread, and the vessel will stay afloat.

As the Loadline convention is a statutory instrument, overloading the ship (and therefore willingly reducing the ship’s freeboard and reserve buoyancy), is not allowed and constitutes an infringement against the maritime law of the flagstate.

Finally, the Loadline convention requires that “The means of securing weathertightness shall be to the satisfaction of the administration” and “The arrangements shall ensure

that the tightness can be maintained in any sea condition and for this purpose tests for tightness shall be required at the initial survey and may be required at periodical surveys and at annual inspections or at more frequent intervals” (Reg. 16-4)

As ICLL compliant hatch covers should prevent water entry, they have to be strong, tight and well secured. Whilst tests are merely carried out to ensure that the sealing arrangements are in order, it is clear that apart from testing, a visual inspection should be carried out as well in order to determine that the hatch cover related structure and securing arrangements are in order. A satisfactory test alone is not a substitute for a careful visual inspection of the hatch covers and in order to confirm that hatch covers are weathertight, and will remain weathertight throughout the voyage, both a test and a visual inspection are necessary.

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## Other conventions and regulations

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Whilst the ICLL is the most important hatch cover related convention, other important conventions apply to hatch covers as well. It is beyond the scope of this article to highlight all possible hatch cover related rules and regulations but some important hatch cover related conventional issues are listed below:

### | SOLAS |

Owners responsibility of maintaining the ship, exemption for fixed fire fighting, carriage of dangerous cargoes (IMDG – dangerous when wet), pesticides (fumigation), ISM (risk, accidents, damage to property), specific safety measures for bulk carriers.

### | MARPOL |

Pollution from hydraulic oil, grease,...

## | MLC |

Safe working, familiarization & training

## | The Code of Safe Working Practice for Merchant Seafarers (COSWP) |

Hatch cover safety guidance.

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### Hatch cover type approval

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It should be noted that hatch covers are designed and type approved by the classification society. Such a type approval confirms that the hatch covers, when properly maintained, are in conformity with the ICLL, applicable rules and regulations and therefore able to withstand the rigours of an ocean voyage.

In case of damage, any repairs, other than day-to-day maintenance, that might have an impact on the hatch cover design and approval criteria, should be brought to the attention of the Classification society and/or flag state as this will allow studying of the intended repairs or modifications and determine if the earlier given type approval is not affected. Also Class will be able to advise on correct repair requirements, welding methods and techniques. In case lashing terminal points (stoppers, D-rings,...) are welded on the hatch covers or coaming, it is best to call in the advice of Class. Not doing so may jeopardize the vessel's Classification status.

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### Commercial and charter party issues

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Under the Hague-Visby rules, Article III, the carrier shall comply with the below 3 main issues when signing a contract of carriage:

The carrier shall be bound before and at the beginning of the voyage to exercise due diligence to:

- (a) Make the ship seaworthy;
- (b) Properly man, equip and supply the ship;
- (c) Make the holds, refrigerating and cool chambers, and all other parts of the ship in which goods are carried, fit and safe for their reception, carriage and preservation.

From a hatch cover point of view, it is considered evident (and required) that hatch covers are in a good condition and in compliance with Class and statutory requirements (see item a)) whenever a charter party or contract of affreightment is signed. However, with regards to supplies (item b)), necessary spare parts for the hatch covers (which can be considered as critical equipment) should be placed on board. This is important to maintain weathertightness during the voyage in case hatch cover parts should become damaged. Furthermore, under part c), hatch covers will have to be inspected and maintained so that the cargo loaded in the holds will not suffer wetting damage.

In order to prove that due diligence was exercised (i.e. by doing everything that is practically possible and reasonable to ensure that the hatch covers are fit and in order for the forthcoming voyage) owners will have to document actions taken to ensure that hatch covers are in good condition.

Quite often a satisfactory ultrasonic or hose test will be considered as sufficient proof that the hatch covers are in order. However, the main issue is not if hatch covers can pass a test (there are plenty ways or “tricks” to pass a test, even if the hatch covers are not in good condition), but if the hatch covers are weathertight and will remain weathertight during the voyage in order to preserve the cargo and avoid water ingress. As pointed out above, this also requires a thorough visual inspection to confirm that the sealing capacity of the hatch covers, as proven by a satisfactory test, can be maintained throughout the voyage. During such a visual inspection, all parts that contribute in maintaining a tight

seal (e.g. bearing pads, locators, stoppers, cleats, drains,...) should be inspected in accordance with manufacturer's instructions and good industry practice.

Unfortunately, till today, and despite of what is mentioned above, we often see that charterers, shippers etc are requesting surveyors to carry out ultrasonic (or hose) tests in order to confirm that the hatch covers are in order (to start loading operations, take a vessel "on-hire",...). Such an instruction – carrying out a hose or ultrasonic test alone – will indicate that the hatch covers are not leaking at time of the test, but will not give information on whether or not due diligence has been carried out and if the necessary hatch cover parts are in a good condition to ensure that tightness can and will be maintained during the voyage. Considering a satisfactory hatch cover test in port alone as sufficient proof that hatch covers are weathertight and will remain weathertight during the voyage is dangerous and might give a false sense of security.

It should be noted that hatch covers are designed and type approved to withstand the rigours of an ocean voyage and face the ordinary perils of the sea. Only when conditions that are beyond the design (approval) criteria are met with, i. e. extreme heavy weather, freak waves etc, it is accepted that some water might enter into the ship, but not to such an extent that the safety of the ship and crew would be at stake. However, as stated before, even small amounts of incoming water may ruin a cargo and so it is possible that water susceptible cargo might suffer wetting damage.

In case of a claim being filed for wetting damage, owners and ship's crew should ensure that the hatch covers are able to withstand detailed scrutiny (visual inspection) and pass a hose or ultrasonic test. This will make it clear that the wetting damage claimed is not the result from improperly maintained hatch covers and can therefore only be the result of extreme weather conditions being met with during the voyage. In such a case, the wetting damage can be referred to as "Act of God"/"Perils of the sea", which will allow redirecting of the claim towards the cargo underwriters.



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## 4-1 DESIGN ISSUES

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Designing hatch covers that are in compliance with the required rules and regulations and at the same time meet with the shipowners expectations (type and size of vessel, maintenance requirements and repair possibilities, carriage of cargo on hatch covers, budget, ...) is a difficult and challenging task and in many cases compromises will have to be made, however, always by keeping in mind that "weathertightness can be maintained in any sea condition" (ICLL (reg. 16(4))), so that the safety of the ship and crew is not at stake.

With owners' requirements in mind, designers and manufacturers will then consider issues like type and construction (open web type, double skin, corrugated, flat topped/peak topped), required stowage space, sealing type and systems, type of operation, weight, securing mechanisms, ...

Once a suitable design has been defined, the plans will be submitted to the Classification society and/or administration who will study and eventually approve the design.

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## 4-2 RELATIVE MOVEMENTS & ACHIEVING TIGHTNESS

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A ship is often compared with a steel box. Although a steel box is quite rigid, the box becomes flexible once the cover (deck) is removed or when large openings are cut into the deck (hatchways).

In order to prevent water ingress in the holds, and to keep the cargo dry, holds have to be covered up with hatch covers which are required to be weathertight. Furthermore, and in order to withstand the forces acting on the hatch covers due to weather conditions (weatherload) and twisting and flexing of the hull whilst the ship is on passage, and by taking into consideration that carriage of deck cargoes may be required, hatch covers need to be strong.

Whilst at sea, the strong and rigid hatch covers will not move in unison with the flexible hull of the ship and hence relative movements will occur which will enhance the risk for water ingress.

Typically, these relative movements, which are the result from weatherloads, ice pressure, flexing, hogging, sagging, twisting and a combination thereof when the ship is at sea, will take place in way of the packing rubber and compression bar interface (hatch cover & coaming and between adjacent panels).

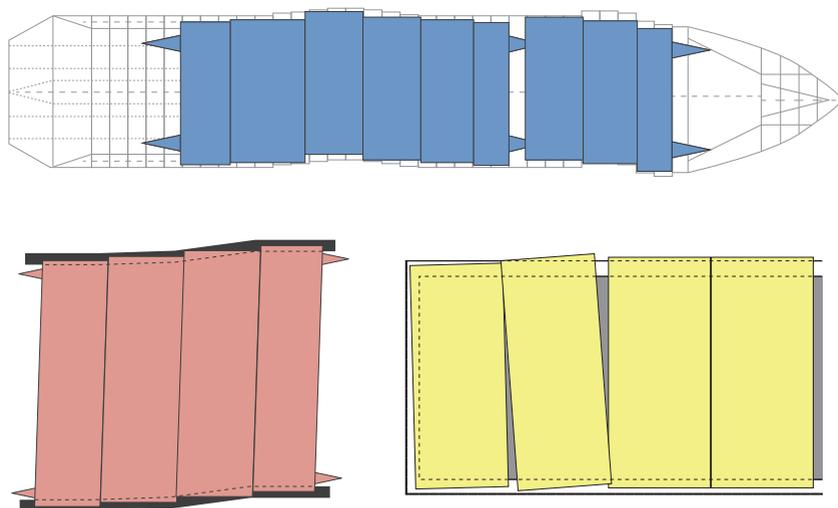


Figure.1 Illustrating relative movements between panels. (Courtesy MacGregor)

It is therefore important to identify/determine the relative movements and to install counter measures that will prevent ingress. By installing a soft and flexible packing rub-

ber in the hatch covers, the resilience of the rubber will compensate for these relative movements and preclude water ingress. However, there may be situations where the packing rubber alone will not be able to keep water out. This would be the case when the packing rubber's design compression (see later in this article) would not be sufficient to compensate for excessive relative movements at a given moment as might be the case during hurricanes or impact of freak waves etc..

Even in such extreme cases, and according to the ICLL, the weathertight integrity should not be impaired and water should not enter into the ship's hold. Therefore, and in order to achieve compliance, manufacturers will install drain systems i.e. drain channel above the packing rubber/compression bar interface in cross joints to evacuate water from the interpanel void space ("A" - Figure 2) as soon as possible and a drain channel ("B" - Figure 2) underneath the packing rubber/compression bar interface which will evacuate incoming water that passes through the rubber/compression bar interface and prevent water from falling into the hold.

Obviously, and when the ship is facing heavy weather, it cannot be avoided that some of the water that collects in the drain channels is spilled over the edge of the drain channel and falls in the hold on the cargo stowed underneath, leading to wetting damage to the cargo with subsequent claims as a result.



Photograph 2

Water spilled over the edge of the drain channel and fell on the cargo stowed underneath.

Whilst the rubber packing and drains are of key importance in keeping water out, it is the hatch cover steel plating that will keep most of the water out and therefore assessing the condition and structural integrity of the panel (and coaming) plating is very important as well.

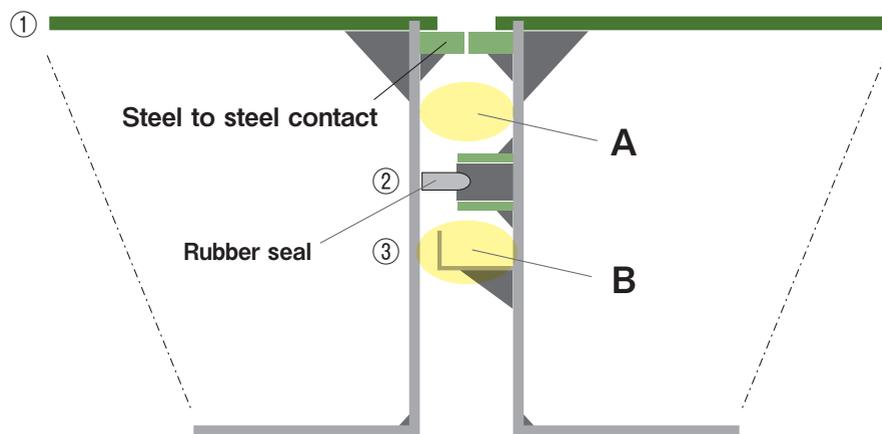


Figure.2 Showing the 3 safety barriers in hatch cover design, i.e. the steel hatch plating ①, the sealing system ② and the drain channel ③

In summary, we can now say that designers and manufacturers will install 3 safety barriers in order to reduce the risk of water ingress to acceptable level (see Figure 2).

### 4-3 KEY PARTS

With hatch covers being equipment that can weigh up to 100 MT or even more and span very large openings, it is clear that hatch covers will only meet with expectations and work well when they are correctly made, installed, maintained and operated.

Apart from the fact that the hatch panel (and coaming) plating, packing rubbers and drain systems will keep the water out, relative movements during the voyage will require

additional equipment and key parts that will keep the panels in place, prevent the distortion of the panel geometry and secure the panels to the ship. As per the ICLL requirements, “The arrangements shall ensure that the tightness can be maintained in any sea condition” and “The load line shall never be submerged at any time when the ship puts to sea, during the voyage or on arrival” (Art. 12). In other words, no water shall enter into the holds. This means that during an inspection in port (where it is usual for inspections to be carried out), one should not only be focussing on whether or not the hatch covers are able to pass a tightness test, but also on judging if the condition of the hatch cover parts as found during the inspection will allow to maintain tightness (and keep the panels in the required sealing position) when the ship is at sea. This further clarifies that carrying out a test of the hatch cover sealing arrangements alone is not sufficient and why a visual inspection is paramount when weathertightness has to be confirmed.

Hatch covers are complex and delicate pieces of engineering which work against very small tolerances and clearances which are all in the range of millimeters. In view of the size and shape of hatch covers, such small tolerances are difficult to check or confirm with the naked eye and therefore measuring equipment such as tapered feeler gauges,



Photograph 3 Using feeler gauges, yardsticks and depth gauges during an inspection

depth gauges, calipers, piano wire (or laser), yardstick etc.... should be in the inspector's toolbox.

## ① Hatch panels & Coaming plating

Hatch panels (panels and stiffeners) and coaming plating (side plating, coaming table and coaming stays) keep most of the water out and have to be able to withstand the impact of waves, weather and cargo loads and as such their structural integrity needs to be assessed at regular intervals. Furthermore, many load bearing parts such as bearing pads, stoppers, locators, cleats, trackways etc... welded onto the hatch panel and coaming table make assessment of the structural integrity of the panels and coaming table a priority item. Inspection should focus on the following items:

### ● Advanced corrosion

Advanced corrosion will affect the strength of the structural members and plating. Preventing the effects from corrosion starts with good maintenance and proper (and timely) painting. Besides being a cosmetic issue, painting is an efficient way to counter the devastating effect of exposure to weather conditions and abrasive cargoes. Visual inspection and thickness measurements will confirm that the plating is still sufficiently thick and strong.



Photograph 4  
Advanced corrosion to hatch panels

### ● Physical damage

Physical damage (cracks, holes, deformations) as a result from stresses (caused by twisting, hogging/sagging, coaming deflection, overloading/improper weight spreading, improper adjustment/alignment of the panels) but also stevedore damages may affect the hatch cover's structural integrity. Therefore, hatch covers should be inspected for damage after loading and discharge operations and the cause of cracks and deformations should be investigated.

### ● Temporary repairs

Temporary repairs or shipboard made lashing terminal points such as stoppers and D-rings. Exposure of hatch cover and coaming structure to heat may cause thermal deflections and improperly made repairs may affect type approval and not be in accordance with requirements or good industry practice.



Photograph 5  
Stevedore damage to hatch panels



Photograph 6  
Welding D-rings on hatch covers

● Presence of rust streaks and leakage traces.

Whilst the external hatch coaming plating is prone to the same damages as the hatch top plating (corrosion, cracks, deformations...), the inner hatch coaming may show the which is prima facie evidence that water has been infiltrating through the hatch covers.



Photograph 7  
Evidence of leakage traces on inner hatch coaming plating

② Packing rubbers

Packing rubbers are fitted in retaining channels that are part of the hatch panel and constitute importance reference material when it comes to hatch panel adjustment. Packing rubbers should be flexible part and provide sufficient resilience to compensate for the relative movements between the panels and panels and coaming.

Whilst often considered to be just “a piece of rubber” packing rubbers have to remain flexible and be able to withstand exposure to heat, cold, sunlight, cargo (abrasive/chemicals, ...), chlorides, etc. as long as possible during their in-service life. On condition that the hatch covers and packing rubbers are well maintained, rubbers will normally age slowly and at a steady pace and easily remain in good shape for a 5 year period.

Various types and designs of rubber packing are available. Part of these designs are the so-called ordinary/box type rubber packings which act on a raised steel compression bar, whilst the other type is the “sliding profile” seal which act on a flat steel mating surface.

Types of rubber packings



Photograph 8 Flex seal, CAT seal and sponge seal

Packing rubbers are designed with a certain design compression (see photographs below) which is generally in the range of 8-20mm. This design compression corresponds with a certain reaction force (line compression) which allows the packing rubber to respond properly and quickly to relative movements in order to keep and maintain a tight seal.

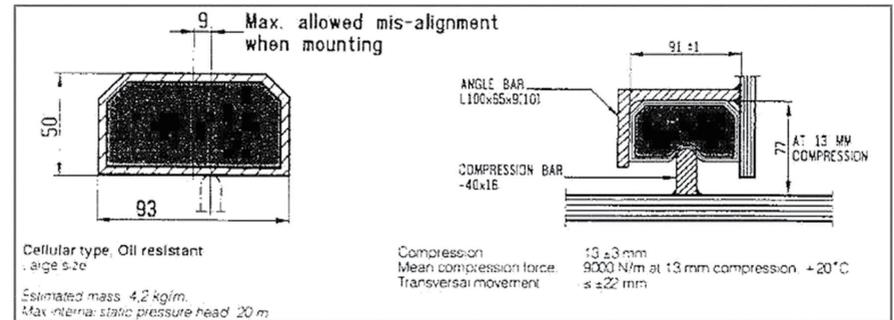
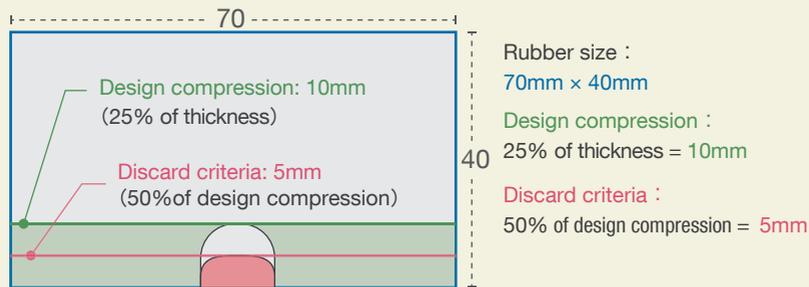


Figure 3 Showing packing rubber specs as per the manufacturer’s manual

It is important that the packing rubber is compressed to its correct design compression since over compression will lead to damage and permanent set of the rubber, whilst insufficient compression will cause the seal to lose contact with the compression bar in less severe weather conditions and allow for water entry.

In order to check if a box-type packing rubber is overcompressed and permanent set excessive, and without a manual being available, the following rule of thumb can be used.

**Design compression** = 25% of the nominal thickness of the packing rubber  
**Discard criteria** = 50% of the design compression



So for a 70x40mm packing rubber with a design compression of 10mm, 5mm of permanent set will be the limit for replacement. In case of the normal type of CAT seal, a round shaped profile, instead of the triangular one, indicates that the packing rubber is nearing the end of its in-service life.

Packing rubbers are normally correctly compressed up to their design by the weight of the panel and not by overtightening the cleats!



Photograph 9 Overcompressed CAT seal

Although often considered to be good practice, crew should refrain from “lubricating” packing rubber with grease like substances such as petroleum jelly, ordinary grease etc

as these lubricants generally tend to react with the packing rubber’s surface and cause damage. Abrasive residues will settle in the grease and cause rapid deterioration of the rubber. Only in specific cases, and when explicitly recommended by the manufacturers, special types of grease (usually silicon grease) can be applied.

When replacing packing rubber, it should be remembered that size is not the only criterion that should be observed. Issues like design compression, weight/metre, mean compression force and installation and preservation requirements should be considered.

Whilst it may be tempting to try “speeding up” replacement of the rubber by lightly inserting the rubber in the retaining channel and closing the panel to push the rubber further into the retaining channel, practice has shown that this does not work and this repair method should be discouraged.

During inspections, it is important to check packing rubbers for following defects which may affect the sealing efficiency such as:

- ⊙ **Overcompression and permanent set (imprint)**

Overcompression and permanent set (imprint) which can be caused by improper adjustment of the steel to steel contact or ageing.
- ⊙ **Physical damage**

Physical damage such as cuts, abrasion, deformation,...
- ⊙ **Discontinuity of the sealing**

Discontinuity of the sealing, meaning that the line of contact should not be interrupted as a result from gaps, missing pieces, steps between adjacent lengths of rubber (usually after partial replacement), damages,...
- ⊙ **Off centre imprint**

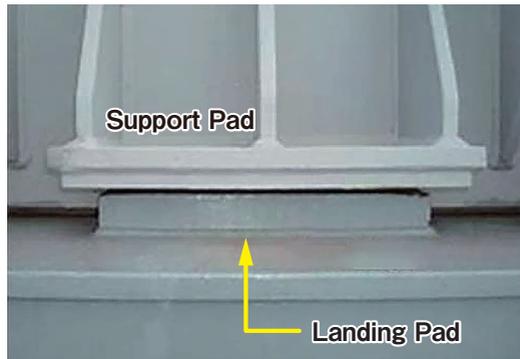
Off centre imprint as result from misalignment, flaws in the design, installation, fitting,....

③ Cleanliness of the sealing surface

Impurities such as cargo remnants, rust, etc should be removed as they might affect sealing and test results or cause irrevocable damage to the packing rubber.

③ Bearing pads

In order to keep the packing rubber at the required design compression, steel to steel contact between the panel and hatch coaming is necessary. This is usually provided by the bearing pads (also called Fz stoppers) which consist of a support pad on the hatch cover and a landing pad on the hatch coaming. Apart from the straightforward steel-to-steel type bearing pads, different designs with different materials for the mating halves are available on the market.



Photograph 10 Support Pad & Landing Pad

Bearing pads will wear down in function of type, age and loads that are acting upon them. According as bearing pads wear down, the compression of the packing rubber will increase and therefore the wear process should be regularly monitored by checking the skirt clearance which can easily be measured with a ruler or feeler gauge. Information regarding the skirt clearance and max. allowed wear on the bearing pads can be found in the manual and will usually be in range of 2-3mm. Some mating surface designs include wear rings or marks that indicate the bearing pad wear.



Photograph 11 Checking skirt clearance with feeler gauge

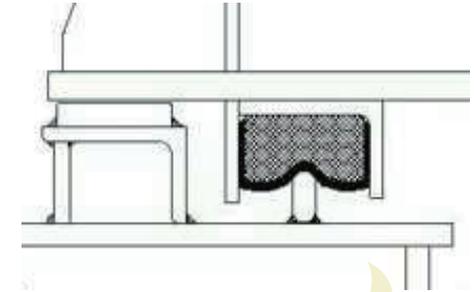


Figure 4 Bearing pad wear will result in overcompression of the packing rubber.

Bearing pads play a crucial role in the sealing process and inspections should focus on:

③ Wear

Wear in way of the landing pads (resulting in reduced skirt clearance).

③ Lack of contact

Lack of contact between the support and landing pads.

③ Structural integrity

Structural integrity of the bearing pads, coaming and deck structure so that the weatherloads and stresses that are acting on the hatch covers can safely be transferred towards the deckstructure.

③ Type of steel

Correct steel for the landing (mild steel) and support pads (hardox).

③ Cleanliness and free movement

Cleanliness and free movement between the landing and support pads (even/smooth surfaces). Greasing of the bearing pad surfaces is usually not recommended (check with manual) and may even accelerate wear down in case dust and abrasive residues settle in the grease.

Older hatch cover designs may not have bearing pads installed in which case the steel to steel contact will be achieved through direct contact of the hatch cover side plating with the hatch coaming. In such cases, wear and damages in way of the panel/coaming interface (lower part of the hatch side plating and coaming table surface) should be checked for damages such as corrosion , grooving, thinning, deformations,....



Photograph 12  
Steel to steel achieved by contact between panel side plating and coaming table. Grooving and through corrosion in way of panel/coaming interface

Bearing pads are relatively easy and quick to repair but adjustment of bearing pads is beyond the capacity of the ship's crew and should preferably be done by qualified repair personnel.

#### ④ Locators

Besides the bearing pads, the locators (sliding positioners) will ensure that the panels are properly guided and positioned when being closed. This means that the packing rubber in way of panel intersections is properly compressed up to the manufacturers' design compression and that panels are properly aligned and centered.

Locators will also operate against small clearances and should be correctly installed and maintained to avoid excessive clearances.

In order to correct for wear in way of the locators, more recent designs include replaceable and adjustable locator pads (with shim plates).



Photograph 13  
Locator with adjustable pads



Photograph 14 Measuring clearance of locator with tapered feeler gauge.

Together with the bearing pads, the locators are important for achieving tightness and therefore regular inspection is required. Inspectors should especially be looking for the following:

- ⊙ Wear and excessive clearance

Wear and excessive clearance (usually 2-3m max) as excessive wear will directly compromise sealing efficiency.

- ⊙ Structural integrity

Structural integrity to ensure that the locator parts and coaming structure can withstand loads and stresses.

#### ⑤ Stoppers

Once properly closed in port (static condition), panels should remain in their correct sealing position throughout the voyage whilst the ship will be in a dynamic condition at sea. Relative movements will tend to distort the panel arrangement, alignment and geometry but in order to prevent forces that are acting on the hull girder to be transferred directly into the panels, some limited movement should be allowed.



Photograph 15 Panel stopper arrangement

Therefore, stoppers (sometimes also called rolling or pitching stoppers depending on their working direction (longitudinal (Fx) or transversal (Fy)) will be installed with small clearances. Depending on the loads and design of the hatch cover panels, stoppers may come in different shapes and sizes. Items to look out for during inspections are:

⊙ **Excessive wear/clearance**

Excessive wear/clearance as with excessive clearances control over the movement of the panels will be lost which would result in damage or accelerated wear of other parts.

⊙ **Structural integrity**

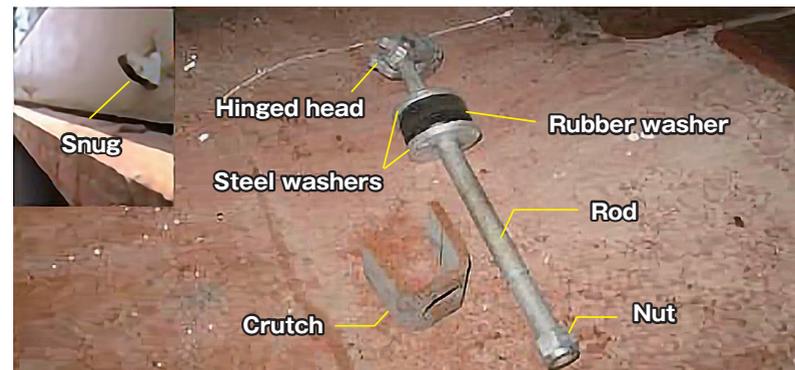
Structural integrity as damages or advanced corrosion and wastage will affect the stopper capacity.

## ⑥ Securing systems

Under the ICLL, it is required that hatch panels can be properly secured to the ship. This is necessary to prevent panels from being pushed off or blown away and leave the hatch and hold exposed to the elements.

Securing of the hatch panels will generally be done manually with the well-known quick acting cleats or holding down devices (the latter usually seen on board of very large

container carriers), or by means of automated systems (self auto-wedge closing systems, hydraulic cleating systems,...). The type of cleat system to be installed will depend amongst others on the number of crew available for preparing the hatch covers for sea as some cleating systems are more time consuming to open/close as others.



Photograph 16 Quick acting cleat parts

It is important to note that cleats are fitted to hold the panel down when the ship is at sea but not to obtain a tighter seal. In order to accommodate for the relative movements, cleats have to be “flexibly” mounted, hence the rubber washers which are generally used for this purpose.

Crew should also be aware that in cases of leaks being found during tests, extra tightening of the securing cleats will not help in achieving a better or tighter seal as the steel to steel contact (bearing pads) will prevent panels to be pulled further down. Excessive tightening will only restrict cleat movements and lead to deformations or even failure of the panel side plating, coaming table and cleat parts which eventually would leave the panels unsecured and the ship at risk.

In order to ensure that cleats are fit for duty, they should regularly be inspected for:

① Structural integrity

Cleats connect the panel with the hatch coaming table and as such, strength related issues such as corrosion, deformations and thinning (reduction of cross-sectional thickness) of the different parts of the cleating system, as well as the coaming table and panel side plating should be checked.

② Total number

As the required holding power can only be achieved when all cleats are in place, missing (and damaged) cleats should be replaced.

③ Flexibility

The rubber washers should be in good condition (not overpainted, no additional steel or rubber washers fitted).

④ Alignment

If cleats are crooked or misaligned their holding power will be affected.

⑤ Adjustment

Cleats allow for adjustment of wear in the hatch cover (bearing pad) system and should be tightened to the correct tension.

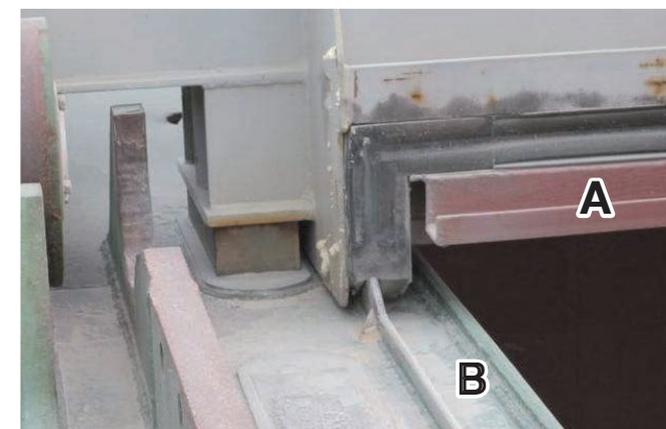
Where cross wedges are installed, attention should be paid to proper installation and adjustment (no building up with shim plates) as well as deformation (bent or “banana shapes” wedges) and overtightening should be avoided.



Photograph 17 “Banana shaped” cross wedge with striker plate built up

## ⑦ Drain systems

When relative movements are exceeding the packing rubber’s design compression, water will pass through the sealing arrangement and collect in the drain channels which will eventually evacuate the incoming water out on deck. As such, drain systems (both in way of the cross joints (“A”) as well as on the hatch coaming (“B”)) are the last barrier to water ingress into the hold.



Photograph 18 Drain systems

Drain systems consist of a drain channel, drain hole in the coaming table and a drain pipe fitted with a non-return valve. The non-return valve will prevent water from outside to enter into the hold (in case of heavy weather).



Photograph 19 Drain systems: Principle - non-return valve

Drain valves should always be open and free but the non-return valve should be closed with the fire cap in case of CO<sup>2</sup> release (fire) or fumigation. Only in case the valves should become damaged during the voyage and if insufficient spare valves are available, the use of a piece of firehose, long enough to bend back on itself to prevent water on deck from entering the drainage system, can be considered as a temporary solution.

Whilst checking drain systems, inspectors should focus on the following points:

☉ **Structural integrity**

Structural integrity of drain channels in cross joints and on the coaming (corrosion, damage,...).

☉ **Type of drain valve**

Original type of drain valve fitted.

☉ **Condition of the drain system**

Drain system (drain channel, drain hole, drainpipe and drain valve) free and unobstructed.

☉ **Fire caps**

Fire caps provided and available in a clearly identified space (e.g. CO<sup>2</sup> station).

Whilst loading or discharging bulk cargo, it can be considered to plug the drain hole to prevent cargo from blocking the drain holes and valves, but attention should be paid to removing the plug prior to closing the hatch covers.

⑧ **Compression bars**

In order to achieve a weathertight seal, packing rubbers act against a packing rubber mating surface, often referred to as the compression bar. Depending on the type of rubber installed, this can either be a raised compression bar (with round-



Photograph 20 Compression bars

ed sealing surface for normal type flex or sponge core seals – Photograph “A”) or a flat steel mating surface (which can be the steel coaming plating itself or a stainless steel strip welded onto the coaming table for the CAT or sliding profile seals - photograph “B”). The flat steel mating surfaces are easy to install, maintain and clean and have no restrictions in movement. Nowadays, the raised type compression bars will generally be made of stainless steel.

Compression bars should usually be checked for some important issues.

① Structural condition

As packing rubber pressure and loads (mean compression force and relative movements) are considerable, compression bars should be structurally intact and strong to withstand the repeated forces acting on them.

② Straightness

Straightness of the compression bars is important as unevenness will result in irregular compression.

③ Smoothness

Smoothness of the compression bar sealing surface will prevent abrasion of, and damage to, the packing rubber surface. Corrosion, cuts, remnants of previous cargo etc... should be identified and addressed.

## ⑨ Operating systems

Modern hatch panels are generally heavy pieces of equipment that require mechanical power to be opened/closed and their operation is not without risk. Electro-hydraulic operated systems are still commonplace but more recently electric driven systems are being installed as well.

From a safety point of view, it is recommended to operate hatch covers with an operator who is in charge of the controls and a supervisor who ensures that no one is passing in way of the moving hatch covers. Hatch covers should always be operated by properly trained personnel.

Strictly speaking, opening and closing mechanisms are not related to the sealing and securing arrangements but they are necessary to open and close the panels for cargo operations.

During inspection, attention should be focused on following items:

① Opening/closing speed

Opening/closing speed (depending on type and manual specs).

② Abnormal noise

Abnormal noise and sounds as well as vibrations during panel operation are indications of problems.

③ Proper greasing of moving parts

Proper greasing of moving parts such as wheels, hinges will facilitate proper operation and extend in-service life of bearings.

④ Oil leakage

Oil leakage from hydraulic systems (deck piping, hydraulic power pack, cylinders) will result in loss of oil, slippery surfaces and can cause pollution.

⑤ Damages and deformations

Damages and deformations to deck, coaming and panel plating will affect strength, structural integrity and may jeopardize proper operations and entail safety hazards.

⑥ Safety items

Safety items, such as safety latches to secure panels in open position or EMY stops should be in good condition and operational.

Hydraulic systems operate at very high pressures (up to 250 bar) and any impurities in the oil will have a devastating “shotgun” effect on the component parts of the power pack, valves etc. Impurities can also be drawn into the system via leak sites and cylinders. Leaks, regardless of their size, should be repaired immediately and it is recommended to protect hydraulic cylinders from contact with cargo remnants and dust with protective sleeves.



Photograph 21  
Protective sleeve for cylinders

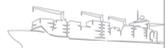
Piping should be thoroughly flushed after repairs to remove debris and oil, even if newly supplied, should be properly filtered before use.

Crew is to be familiar with the emergency closing procedures (EMY power packs, wire operated systems, ...) in order to reduce delays in operation and/or prevent cargo in the holds from becoming wet.

When chains or wires (incl. associated gypsies and pulleys) are used for opening and closing of the hatch covers, they should be checked for strength, wear and diminution, damage, proper tension, elongation. In case the hatch cover system consists of pontoons which are lifted by crane, it is important to check the strength of the lifting points on the panels and conspicuous marking of same is recommended.



Photograph 22 Pontoon covers on container vessel properly marked/indicated



Most of the wetting damage claims as a result from hatch cover leakage are commercial related, rather than statutory related. In cases where cargo has sustained wetting damage, it is often assumed that the ship/owners failed to exercise due diligence in making hatch covers weathertight. Within the context of hatch covers, due diligence requires the master/owners to carry out a normal and reasonable inspection to ensure that the hatch covers are in good condition. In case defects are noted, it is expected that necessary steps are taken to correct the situation. It is important that corrective actions are made in line with good industry standards and maker's guidelines.

Very often, when being faced with unsatisfactory test results, various sealants such as marine sealing tape, expansion foam etc are used to cover the leaky spots, which is not in line with the due diligence principle. The use of extra sealants allows claimants to assume that the master/shipowner was aware of the tightness issues and decided not to repair the problem in a proper way and decided to opt for the cheapest and quickest solution that would allow him to start the voyage and meet with commercial deadlines. By doing so the Master and shipowner would fail in their duty to provide a seaworthy and cargoworthy ship and look after the safety of the ship, crew and cargo by not complying with the due diligence requirements.



Photograph 23 Marine tape



Photograph 24 Expansion foam

It is however, a fact that many charterers or shippers are asking Masters to apply sealing tape after loading and by doing so they put the Master in a difficult position. On the one hand, Masters have the duty to cooperate with charterers and comply with reasonable requests that do not affect the ship's safety, but on the other hand, masters are (or should be) aware of the fact that applying marine sealing tape might put them in a difficult position in case the cargo should sustain wetting damage during the voyage. In such cases, masters and owners should ensure that they can prove that, before applying the sealing tape, the hatch covers were weathertight, i.e. passed an ultrasonic (or hose) test as well as a visual inspection which confirmed that all hatch cover parts are in a well maintained and good condition. In such case it might be recommended to call in the assistance of a surveyor to carry out the hatch cover test and inspection. Results of these inspections will be considered as a third party confirmation that all is in order and would provide good evidence in case of a claim. In case defects are found during such an inspection, they should be addressed in a proper way prior to applying the sealants. Finally, making a note in the ship's logbook stating that the hatch covers were tested, inspected and found in order (and making reference to the test/inspection report), and that the sealing tape was applied at the explicit request of charterers or shippers would be further proof of a professional approach towards the use of marine sealing tape.

One thing that is also often overlooked in case it is decided to apply marine sealing tape (various types are currently on the market), is that this sealing tape adheres strongly to the hatch panel surface (it is even recommended to heat the panel surface/tape to ensure

proper adhesion, especially in cold weather). Upon completion of the voyage, the tape will be removed, but generally during this removal process paint becomes detached, leaving the panel surface unprotected and exposed to the elements with corrosive action setting in if not dealt with quickly and in a proper manner. Maintenance of the areas with coating breakdown is time consuming, especially when the sealing tape is applied on all hatch covers, and will deviate attention from other (and perhaps more necessary) ship-board maintenance tasks. When owners are convinced that their hatch covers are in good condition and able to prove this, it is better to reconsider the charterers' request to apply marine sealing tape and/or to include in the C/P that no sealing tape will be applied.

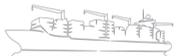
With regards to the fumigation issue, it should be noted that hatch covers are built and type approved to be weathertight, not gastight. In order to reduce the risk of fumigation gas escaping (which is a threat to people and will reduce fumigation efficiency) sealants can be used, but in that case it is not used for masking defects but rather to improve fumigation safety and efficiency.

However, and before applying the sealing tape, hatch covers are normally tested and inspected and only when they are in good shape and weathertight, the sealing tape can be applied in order to enhance gastightness.

Many ship owners are saying indeed that they apply sealing tape as "extra" precaution but unfortunately investigations generally reveal that the hatch covers were not weathertight at the outset of the voyage in the first place so that the sealing tape cannot be considered as an "extra security" but rather as a shortcut to avoid expenses for necessary repairs and maintenance in case hatch covers leak (which is not in line with the due diligence principle).

Always remember that there will be relative movements between the panels as well as between the panels and the ship (especially in heavy weather) which might cause the sealing tape to become damaged, detached and loose.

## EVIDENCE IN CASE OF CLAIMS



In the unfortunate event that a claim is filed against the ship, and in order to help the P&I club and legal people to defend the owner's interests, it will be up to the master and owners to prove that they have done whatever is necessary in order to make the hatch covers weathertight. This can be done by providing relevant documents such as:

- Work schedules
- Maintenance logs & test reports
- Work specifications
- Standing instructions
- Reports and correspondence
- Logbook entries
- Hatch patentee manual
- Holding valid (relevant) certificates
- Evidence of planning voyage & weather reports
- Proof of operating the ship in a good/seamanlike manner during the voyage (C/C, RPM, etc.)

## HATCH COVER TESTING



The ICLL states that *“The arrangements shall ensure that the tightness can be maintained in any sea conditions, and for this purpose tests for tightness shall be required at the initial survey and may be required at periodical surveys and at annual inspections or at more frequent intervals”*.

There are different methods for testing hatch covers and in a number of cases it may be useful or recommended to combine different methods in order to get an as good impression as possible about the hatch cover condition. The most commonly used testing methods are listed below:

- Ultrasonic test
- Hose test
- Light infiltration
- Chalk/grease test (for normal or sliding-type rubbers)
- Smoke test
- Pressure decay

(It is beyond the scope of this article to explain each of the above testing methods in detail, but further information can be found in class regulations or by contacting the author of the article).

It should be noted that the above testing methods mainly provide information about the sealing system only. Weathertightness requires not only confirmation that hatch covers are tight, but also that the structural integrity and securing related issues are in order.

Tightness can only be achieved and maintained during the voyage on condition that all component parts are in good condition which can only be confirmed after a detailed visual inspection by qualified and knowledgeable persons. Concluding that hatch covers are weathertight on basis of an ultrasonic test alone is dangerous and might lead to cargo claims.

# MAIN PROBLEMS FOUND



Experience has revealed that, when testing and inspecting hatch covers, the following typical or frequently seen mistakes are identified below.

## Common mistakes

- Insufficient knowledge about hatch covers, not allowing for good inspections and proper, understandable reporting
- Overestimating the capability of the ship's crew for repairs (maintenance & adjustment)
- Omitting to call in specialists (remember that being able to prove that repairs were carried out by a specialist team will help in proving due diligence)
- Overlooking the importance of involving class when shipboard repairs are carried out on hatch covers
- Improper/temporary repairs by crew
- Missing manual/drawings
- No proper and detailed on-board instructions for maintenance
- No maintenance files on board (i.e. PMS) to document maintenance and repairs
- Hatch covers not included in SMS and PMS
- No understanding of the due diligence principle and requirements
- Insufficient spare parts

## Weather tightness mistakes

- Ignoring discard/replacement criteria (over-compression)
- Replace rubber packing without addressing steel to steel contact issues
- Installation of backing strips everywhere, even on top of rubber packing
- Mix of new and old rubber
- Using old rubber (from shipboard stock and ignoring shelf life)
- Use of small pieces and filling-in of gaps
- Improper maintenance of seals and rubber channel (painting)

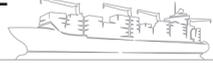
## Mechanical mistakes

- Abnormal sounds/vibration during operation ignored
- No greasing, no greasing plan
- Onboard repairs instead of landing panels ashore
- Ignoring safety issues (heavy and moving equipment)

## Hydraulic mistakes

- Cleaning filters instead of changing
- Improper filtering
- Closing covers without pump
- Changing of pipes without flushing
- Valve positions during voyage
- Ignoring leaks & pollution risk
- Ignoring high pressure risk

# CONCLUSION



Hatch cover maintenance and operation requires a thorough understanding of basic principles together with type specific issues and requirements. Experience and claims show that hatch cover problems still remain one of the predominant causes for claims and accidents on board vessels.

Whilst hatch cover claims are generally associated with wetting damage, it should not be overlooked that incorrect maintenance or operation may involve loss of life and limb or pollution. Moreover, claims for wet damaged cargo, pollution or accidents and injuries will always have an adverse impact on the owner's business model.

To avoid hatch cover related claims, owners should consider setting up dedicated training and familiarization programmes related to occupational safety, operation and inspection. Relevant and type specific hatch cover checklists should be made and their use implemented.

## TRAINING

Assistance and help with developing training strategies and checklists can be obtained from the author of this article.

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