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Reporting through a single window

Brussels directive seeks to clarify and simplify the spider's web of logistics intelligence

Felicity Landon - Friday 12 October 2012

WHEN the European Port Community Systems Association formally launched little more than a year ago, its six founding members were clear — their intention was to provide an important source of expert opinion with regard to any new e-directive being considered by the European Union.

And in their combined approach of encouraging, advising and lobbying, they are apparently making strong impressions on policymakers, attracting eight additional members and with more expected to sign up soon.

“In many cases, the priority was to explain exactly what a port community system does,” says EPCSA secretary-general Richard Morton.

The simple explanation is that the electronic platform provided by a PCS is at the heart of the spider's web of logistics intelligence required for smooth trading, bringing real-time information to customs and other authorities, forwarders, shippers, shipping lines, terminal operators, inspection agencies, hauliers and railway operators, with no need for endlessly re-keying information.

For ports in Europe handling thousands of containers a day that have well-established PCSs, it is hard to imagine how they ever functioned without such a system — yet plenty of busy terminals in Europe and around the world still deal with the pile of paperwork that is otherwise involved.

For EPCSA, if its priority objective is to lobby Europe, its second objective is to encourage and support the development of port community systems around Europe.

It is also already getting involved further afield, with, for example, new members from Israel and Ukraine recently signed up and looking to EPCSA for support.

Specifically for Europe, however, the key message to politicians, says Mr Morton, is “let's not reinvent the wheel”.

In many ways, EPCSA members feel they must fight their corner. EU Directive 2010/65 on ships' reporting formalities states that by a deadline of 1 June 2015, all member states must accept electronic reports via a so-called single window.

A single window, as defined by the UN, is a system that allows all participants in foreign trade to file all required information simultaneously, in one place, in standard form and to one agency.

An effective single window should benefit both government agencies and business, according to UN Economic Commission for Europe regional adviser for trade Mario Apostolov.

For governments, it should bring good governance, efficient distribution of resources, better collection of duties and fees, more compliance by business and more security for business.

Its benefits should include efficiency, lower costs because of time saved on document preparation, faster release of goods, predictable and efficient description and implementation of rules, along with more transparency.

According to EPCSA, port community systems already handle significant parts of a single window, particularly the business and administration information flows.

“We are working hard to ensure that, in the rush to implement single window requirements, the EC doesn't undermine what port community systems are already doing,” says Mr Morton.

“If the PCSs are ignored, or swept aside in favour of something new, the ports using them would grind to a halt. They would have to redesign a system and duplicate what port community systems are doing for them at the moment.”

Last month, EPCSA members had a meeting with the European Maritime Safety Agency to re-emphasise that a large proportion of the single window business to administer electronic messages is already being implemented within PSCs as well as, in some cases, administration to administration messages.

EPCSA's founding members are Soget of France, Maritime Cargo Processing of the UK, Portic from Spain, Portbase from the Netherlands, and the German firms dbh and Dakosy.

The association created a Twelve Actions guide to developing a port community system and is now working with other organisations to develop a policy paper based on this.

“This will help explain to European policymakers and transport ministers at national level the strategic objectives of a port community system and what they need to do to make it happen in their country,” says Mr Morton.

“There are so many e-initiatives that appear to be starting from scratch but the requirements of the 2010/65 ships reporting formalities directive, which includes the development of a single window, must be delivered in a harmonised and realistic way. The experience of EPCSA's members could play a vital role in this.”

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Morton: "If the PCSs are ignored, or swept aside in favour of something new, the ports using them would grind to a halt."

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