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When blue fuels masquerade as green



Andrew Craig-Bennett · August 29, 2023

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Andrew Craig-Bennett questions who's going to properly certify the origins of all these new fuels hitting the market.

The Emperor's New Clothes is a tale written by Hans Christian Andersen in 1837. Disney hasn't made a film of it; the plot turns on a vain monarch, who is tricked into believing that he has bought a magnificent suit of clothes, when in fact he has bought nothing at all. He is the victim of a confidence trick. I think we are about to be the victims of a confidence trick on, literally, an industrial scale.

Merchant shipping may perhaps claim that the idea of trusted groups of people who are paid to publish the plain truth about the nature and condition of something in a manner that is accessible to people who don't own that thing, but who may need to rely on information about it, started a couple of centuries ago with the classification societies, and extended from there. These bodies are so much a part of our everyday world-class, the USDA, SGS, and so on – we literally cannot move without them – that we take their work for granted.

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There is a gap in the system of surveys, sampling, attestation, verification, quality assurance and the rest which I don't recall reading about. I think it's going to be rather important.

We are quickly getting used to the idea that colourless liquids and gases have an invisible colour after all, be it brown, blue or green, none of which we can see, that people are throwing these terms around, with nobody who can be relied on saying which "colour" a given stock of the new planet-friendly fuels are.

A quick recap. Brown fuels are the regular dirty kind that we all use every day. Blue fuels are made from brown feedstocks by stripping the excess carbon out (where does it go?) and green fuels – the sort that everyone imagines

being used – are made without contributing any carbon dioxide to the atmosphere at all. An example of a green fuel might be hydrogen gas formed by electrolysis of water using electricity from wind power. An example of a blue fuel might be hydrogen gas made by stripping the carbon from regular methane.

You will have seen the problem: these molecules are small and simple and are carried and used in reasonably pure forms. Nobody can tell blue from green. In this they are very unlike heavy fuel oil, which always retains the chemical fingerprints, accessible by gas chromatography mass spectroscopy, of the oil field from which the crude that they were made from originated.

There is a truly vast difference in cost between any blue fuel and any green fuel, and to add to the fun not all blue fuels are equal. There is a world of difference between methanol made from chopped-up tropical forest, methanol made from sugar cane grown on what was once tropical forest before it was chopped up, and methanol made using water, atmospheric carbon dioxide and hydrogen from the electrolysis of seawater using wind and wave power.

We all know what is going to happen. People are going to claim that blue fuels are green fuels, and the money that will be made from this will make the global trade in illicit hard drugs seem like stamp collecting. It seems to me that there will be a need for reliable, generally accepted, certification of the true origins of marine fuels. One might think that people like IACS and SGS would be leading a charge to get into the business of certifying environmental probity... if they are, they are being rather quiet about it.

There was an article in *Splash* last month on [carbon insetting](#) which tells us that there is going to be a market in tokens that certify – perhaps, in the absence of a recognised source of that certification, I should write tokens that assert – that goods were shipped using low carbon fuel. That article is concerned with the trading of such certifications, not with the generation of them, and I rather think that, as we have seen rather regularly in shipping since the original Baltic Exchange Index, forty years ago, it may be easier to set up a market place and a trading mechanism than it will be to certify the validity and the value of the intangibles signified by the tokens being traded.

It may well be that my friends in the classification societies have forgotten to tell me about their plans for fuel origin certification, or it may be that they are keeping them under wraps pending an announcement at a suitable shipping industry shindig. Even better – much better in fact, they could pick up the phone, send an email or a text to *Splash*. I would very much like to think that they are about to do so.

Without a reliable means of certifying exactly what the origins of the fuel being bought and used are, there is very little point in trying to use low-emission fuels... we will just be trying to wear the emperor's new clothes.



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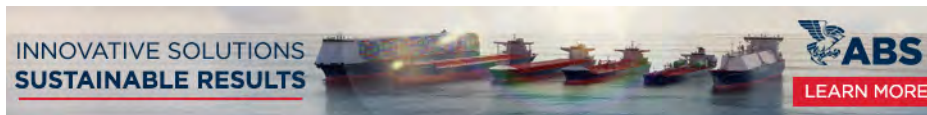
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