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HGK Shipping sets new standards: a hazardous goods vessel in Flanders is granted a permit for remote-controlled operations for the first time to optimise business processes

Duisburg / Hasselt. HGK Shipping is systematically demonstrating its commitment to combat the shortage of specialist workers in inland waterway shipping: Europe's largest inland waterway shipping company is the first of its kind to recently receive a one-year test permit in Flanders from the responsible licensing authority, De Vlaamse Waterweg nv (Flemish Waterways PLC), to remotely operate a hazardous goods vessel; this is taking place in conjunction with possibly extending navigation times. The permit allows the vessel to be steered from a Remote Operations Centre (ROC) on the waterways east of Antwerp. Only one specially trained employee will be required on board for the third phase of this operational optimisation process instead of two skippers. The chemicals tanker, "Walcheren", is also the first vessel operated by HGK Shipping, which will make use of the benefits of this innovative technology in the Flemish region of Belgium to allow an optimised crew size.

"Smarter use of personnel is the purpose of our efforts to introduce remote-controlled inland waterway shipping in order to address the serious shortage of specialist workers, which will become even more severe in future. The permit, which has now been issued in Flanders and makes it possible in certain types of operations to reduce the crew on board by one skipper, represents an enormously important step along this journey," says Steffen Bauer, the CEO of the HGK Group and the CEO of HGK Shipping. "The permit issued for a hazardous goods vessel within our Wijgula fleet shows that the technology thoroughly convinced the authorities in terms of safety during previous test phases."

Vessels were already being remotely controlled from the individual ROCs during phase 2 of the test operations, which HGK Shipping is implementing in the Netherlands and Germany too. However, the skippers prescribed in personnel regulations continued to remain on board during this transitional phase. This is no longer necessary on the designated route on the Flemish waterways, as the technology of the project partner, SEAFAR, has proven its operating reliability and compliance with statutory requirements.

During phase 3, HGK Shipping only requires one skipper and one sailor instead of two skippers on board the "Walcheren" for the regulated, so-called "A2 navigation time" of 18 hours. The ROC operator, who has all the necessary qualifications, remotely controls the vessel for

four hours, while the sailor monitors the vessel's operations in the wheelhouse and the skipper on board can take his rest period. Introducing this scheme requires intensive training as well as close coordination between the project partners.

Safe transport operations with a flexible use of personnel

"The fact that the "Walcheren" in particular, a chemicals tanker, is our first vessel for phase 3, illustrates the high degree of reliability that the authorities in Flanders have attributed to this technology, even for sensitive types of cargo. Following successful phase 2 tests in the Netherlands and Germany, we're also expecting to switch to operating vessels with optimised crew levels there too through close coordination with the responsible authorities," says Steffen Bauer, emphasising his point, in the light of the company's objectives.

Given the tangible shortage of specialist skippers and the goal of making this job description more attractive by using innovative digital solutions, HGK Shipping is consistently pressing ahead with developing remote controls for inland waterway vessels. The vessels recently put into service already have the necessary technology; if required, this will be gradually retrofitted on older models.

Notes on the attached photos:

1. The "Walcheren", a chemicals tanker operated by HGK Shipping, can be steered using remote controls during test operations on the Flemish waterways east of Antwerp.
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2. The operator, who has all the necessary qualifications, uses remote controls to steer HGK Shipping's vessel, "Walcheren", at the Remote Operations Centre in the Flemish region of Belgium.
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About the HGK Group:

Häfen und Güterverkehr Köln AG (HGK) is the logistics company within the City of Cologne's public utilities group. Formerly just a port operator, HGK has developed into a group that provides integrated transport and logistics services with operations across Europe. Structured in five divisions, Logistics & Intermodal, Shipping, Rail Operations, Infrastructure & Maintenance and Real Estate, the HGK Group operates the largest inland waterway port network in Germany, one of the largest private railway companies for transporting cargo, specialist logistics firms and terminals as well as its own railway network and workshops for railway goods traffic through its subsidiaries and holding companies. HGK Shipping GmbH is the largest inland waterway shipping company in Europe.

About the HGK Shipping division:

HGK Shipping is part of Häfen und Güterverkehr Köln AG. Its fleet comprises about 300 vessels, including owner-operated ships. The spectrum of goods transported ranges from liquid chemical products and liquefied gases to dry goods and even break-bulk cargo.