



The dry bulk carrier *Green Universe* (IMO 9573751). Photo credit: Alv van Beem via Pixabay.

Speaking for the sector

Why a unified bulk voice matters

By INTERCARGO

Dimitris Monioudis, Chair of the Technical Committee at INTERCARGO (The International Association of Dry Cargo Shipowners), calls for all stakeholders: charterers, ports, terminals, miners, insurers and financiers to break down silos and engage in better communication, collaboration and standardisation. Working in isolation compromises safety, crew wellbeing and supply chain efficiency.

Dry bulk shipping moves the world. Iron ore becomes bridges, factories and skyscrapers. Coal powers industry and homes. Without grain and fertilizers, populations go hungry.

The dry cargo sector represents 43% of the global fleet by tonnage and performs 55% of global transport work. In other words: more than half of all seaborne trade by volume.

Australia is at the centre of this industry. It is a leading producer of iron ore and coal, as well as a major player in grains and critical minerals such as bauxite,

manganese, copper concentrate, lithium and chromite. These exports sustain economic development and energy security worldwide, not just domestically. In 2024–25, Australia's resource and energy exports were valued at AUD \$385 billion and are forecast to remain above \$350 billion through 2026–27. Iron ore alone contributes over \$100 billion annually. Metallurgical coal remains steady at \$36–37 billion, and thermal coal, though gradually declining, will still deliver \$26 billion by 2026–27.

Critical minerals, particularly lithium, are gaining momentum. Lithium earnings are forecast to grow from \$4.8 billion to \$6.1 billion by 2026–27 as demand for batteries accelerates. Copper exports will climb from \$13 billion to \$16 billion.

What does this mean operationally? Cargo mix changes. Routes adjust. Ships and ports face new operational demands requiring infrastructure modification and upgrading.

Global economic uncertainty has eased somewhat, but risks persist. IMF forecasts show growth inching up to 3.1% in 2026. That sounds optimistic given how tariff disputes and trade fragmentation continue to distort flows. US tariff hikes have triggered front-loading of imports and forced exporters to seek alternative markets. China is restructuring its steel sector to cut overcapacity and improve margins. India is pushing for 300 million tonnes of steel capacity by 2030 but faces its own tariff headwinds.

The energy transition complicates everything even more. Net-zero commitments are reshaping demand without clarity in the associated supply of alternative fuels. Fossil fuel usage is under pressure, yet energy security concerns keep coal in play for now. Thermal coal faces a structural decline, but metallurgical coal demand remains resilient thanks to India and Southeast Asia.

Green steel is no longer a concept; it is a driver. Demand for high-grade iron ore will rise while low-grade fines risk becoming stranded assets. This affects shipping as much as mining.

Operations, Safety and the Road Ahead

Port State Control data reveals an additional challenge: vessels at Australian ports show one of the highest deficiencies per inspection rates globally, with a 4.3% detention rate. These figures reflect AMSA's rigorous enforcement but also highlight the need for constructive dialogue between regulators, owners and operators.

Common issues include hatch cover integrity, ballast water management and Maritime Labour Convention compliance. These issues directly affect safety, efficiency and cost. When ports, terminals and operators work in silos, problems multiply. Misaligned loading practices or unclear communication on ship equipment expectations can lead to delays, disputes and unnecessary stress for crews and shore staff. INTERCARGO is working to bring everyone to the table. Fragmented efforts put lives at risk, cause delays and cost money throughout the logistics chain.

Safety is non-negotiable, the foundation for productivity, resilience and adaptability. Detention rates fell where collaboration improved. Poor coordination, conversely, amplifies risk. Cargo liquefaction remains a leading cause of fatalities globally primarily due to shippers' inadequate practices. Mooring operations and pilot transfers still present hazards. Crew wellbeing suffers when schedules are disrupted by poor communication. Safety is not just a technical issue; it is a human one. Ever increasing cargo loading rates put pressure on humans and hardware.

Then there's decarbonisation. For dry bulk operators, decarbonisation means rethinking safety, design and commercial operations simultaneously. We are still figuring out how new fuels will fit into real-world operations. Ship owners are attempting with great difficulty to assess fuel availability, lifecycle emissions, infrastructure readiness and associated high costs which no doubt will eventually be passed on to the final consumer. These choices will shape fleets for decades, since ships ordered today will most likely trade into the 2050's.

INTERCARGO was established in 1980 and has gradually grown to represent around 200 quality owners/managers operating approx. 4,500 bulk carriers representing 40% of the global fleet including more than 55% of the capesize vessels calling Australia.

INTERCARGO's partnership with Singapore's Global Centre for Maritime Decarbonisation in 2025 is an example of our commitment to evidence-based progress and engagement with all potential enablers worldwide for a safer more sustainable shipping. Regulation alone cannot deliver this transition; it must be supported by real data, real vessels and real collaboration. And that collaboration must extend way beyond shipowners to ports, terminals, charterers, cargo interests and insurers because fuel readiness, port and bunkering infrastructure and cargo compatibility are shared responsibilities.

2026, sees the world placing huge demands for a better future on technological developments. But here is the truth: too often, digital tools just make things harder.

Technology succeeds when it genuinely reduces administrative burden, strengthens human skills and supports decisions. Otherwise, it becomes another problem. Digital tools only work when data flows freely across the chain. Fragmented systems and inconsistent standards undermine efficiency. INTERCARGO advocates for digital solutions that promote interoperability and transparency because standardisation is the foundation of progress.

INTERCARGO Leadership and the Call for Collective Action

INTERCARGO represents owners and operators at the highest levels of global decision-making. Our Technical Committee examines risks, explores solutions and strives to shape current best practices and future standards. We engage directly with classification societies, port authorities and research institutions. We participate actively at the IMO, bringing forward evidence and insight that reflect real operational experience over many decades.

Our support of DryBMS, the quality self-assessment scheme for dry bulk operators, is a clear example of this

leadership. By promoting safety, environmental performance, crew welfare and operational excellence, DryBMS provides a practical framework for continuous improvement. For Australian stakeholders, participation in these initiatives is not just a badge of quality; it is a competitive advantage. But DryBMS works best when its principles extend beyond the ship to the terminal, the port and the overall supply chain. Quality is not a siloed concept; it is a shared responsibility.

The path forward requires cooperation. There is no genuine alternative. Silos compromise safety, crew wellness and supply chain efficiency. Safety challenges, sustainability pressures and technological change all demand collective solutions. They require shared understanding, coordinated action, transparency and realistic ambition.

INTERCARGO is not here to dictate. We are here to convene. We invite charterers, ports, terminals and cargo interests to sit at the same table and speak openly about what works and what does not. Paying lip service to collaboration is simply not enough. We know that operational friction often comes from misaligned priorities. We also know that true collaboration reduces risk and improves efficiency. When everyone shares data, standards and expectations, ships spend less time waiting and crews spend less time under stress.

This is not theory. Over the past few years, we have seen the concrete benefits where actual dialogue exists. Detention rates fall. Safety improves. Commercial outcomes improve. The challenge is scaling that success across the global dry bulk network. That is why INTERCARGO continues to push for practical frameworks, transparent benchmarking and a culture of accountability. We believe the sector can lead by example, but only if every stakeholder accepts that responsibility.

INTERCARGO invites all Australian stakeholders to step up and establish clear and regular communications with the ship operating community collectively. Its impact on the Australian economy is too big to ignore.

Dry bulk shipping remains central to global trade. Keeping it there requires working together. 