

Effective July 1, 2016, containers departing from any port in the world must list the Verified Gross Mass or "VGM" of the container as declared by the shipper. Failure to provide the VGM will result in the terminal operator refusing to load the container onto the vessel.

Background

The International Maritime Organization's Amendment under the Safety of Life at Sea (SOLAS) convention is a result of maritime casualties which directly resulted from inaccurately declared weights. The marine industry has been battling misdeclared weights for years. The most notable incident spurring the SOLAS amendment was findings that 20% of the containers on the MSC Napoli were more than 3 tons greater than declared, which led to structural failure during a storm in 2007. In another incident, the MV Limari, which suffered stack collapse in 2007, showed the failed rows were loaded with containers which exceeded the declared weights by as much as 362%. Studies in many ports around the world show this to not be an uncommon problem, with percentages of misdeclared containers ranging from 10% to 56%.

Verified Gross Mass "VGM"

The Verified Gross Mass (VGM) is the weight of the cargo including dunnage and bracing plus the tare weight of the container carrying this cargo. SOLAS requires the shipper to provide VGM in a "shipping document", either as part of the shipping instructions or in a separate communication, before the vessel loading. The vessel operator and the terminal operator will be required to use verified container weights in vessel stowage plans and will be prohibited from loading a packed container on board a vessel if the container does not have a verified container weight. Failure to provide the VGM will result in the container receiving a no load order.

Responsible Parties

The regulations place the requirement on the "shipper", regardless of who packed the container, to provide the container's gross verified weight to the vessel and terminal operators.

The "shipper" is a "legal entity or person named on the bill of lading or sea waybill or equivalent multimodal transport document as shipper and/or who a contract of carriage has been concluded with a shipping company. [IMO & WSC Guidelines]. Please carefully review who is listed as the "shipper" on the bill of lading and ensure they are in compliance with the SOLAS amendment.

Weighing Methods

The SOLAS amendment provides two methods by which shippers may determine the container weight once the container packing process has taken place. These are:

1. Weighing the container after it has been packed or;
2. Weighing all the cargo and contents of the container, including dunnage and securing equipment, and adding those weights to the container's tare weight as indicated on the door end of the container.

Under either method, the weighing equipment used must meet national certification and calibration requirements. Further, the party packing the container cannot use the weight anyone else has provided. There is one exception: "Individual, original sealed packages that have the accurate mass of the packages and cargo items (including any other material such as packing material and refrigerants inside the packages) clearly and permanently marked on their surfaces, do not need to be weighed again when they are packed into the container."

Margins of Error

There is no provision for a tolerance of margin of error in the SOLAS Amendment, though local jurisdictions are announcing margins of +/- one ton. The slim to none tolerance is designed to meet the goal of the IMO which is to improve **SAFETY**. The amendment will make the industry shift from stowage plans based on estimated weights to stowage plans based on scientific and calibrated weighing methods.

Enforcement

Enforcement is a national issue and will vary country by country. Although no countries are excluded from SOLAS, local authorities may choose the severity of fines and penalties for non-compliance. Likewise, each local jurisdiction will implement its own methods of audits, inspections and other means by which to ensure compliance by the shippers

Additional Information

SBS is continually working to gather information from the regions from which your cargo ships and will support all VGM procedures

