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France goes green with new maritime policy

Environmental themes key to R&D, education, and security strategy

Andrew Spurrier - jeudi 10 décembre 2009

THE French government has initiated a research and development programme entitled Ship of the Future as part of a series of measures to mark its adoption of an integrated maritime policy covering all maritime and marine activities for the first time.

To oversee the programme, which has as its objective the development of cleaner, safer and more intelligent vessels with reduced fuel consumption, it has set up a council for research and innovation in shipbuilding and other naval activities.

In the same spirit, the government has pledged to give early ratification to the Hong Kong Convention for safe and environmentally sound recycling of obsolete vessels.

It has also set up a parliamentary commission to study the possibility of developing a French shiprecycling industry.

In another announcement, the government said it planned to set up a central coastguard-type body to oversee the France's coastal protection and rescue services, which are currently largely run on a regional basis, and has officially launched the reform of merchant navy training in France.

The country's four existing merchant training establishments in Le Havre, Nantes, Saint Malo and Marseilles are to become part of a new national merchant navy higher education establishment.

In announcing these and a number of other non-shipping measures, the government said it wanted to give concrete form to the integrated maritime policy it adopted on Tuesday.

The policy, which makes sustainable development official policy throughout the maritime and marine sectors for the first time in France, was adopted at an inter-ministerial committee chaired by prime minister François Fillon.

It is contained in a 44-page blue book entitled National Strategy for the Sea and the Oceans, which aims to cover the whole range of maritime and marine industries and activities in metropolitan France and French overseas territories.

It has been compiled at the express request of President Nicolas Sarkozy after an extensive national and regional consultation process in the first half of this year.

The policy is organised around four priorities: research into and respect for the marine environment; development of a sustainable marine economy; promotion of the maritime dimension of France's overseas territories; and affirmation of France's place in Europe and the world at large.

Last week, Mr Fillon promised at a conference in Brest that the government's new policy would strike a balance between environmental considerations and the need for economic development.

French Maritime Cluster chairman Francis Vallat, whose organisation played a key role in the elaboration of the new policy, said yesterday that he thought the government had found the right balance.

"What is interesting from our point of view is that both dimensions are there in a balanced manner," he said. "That seems to us very positive."

He added, however, that the policy only provided a framework for future action.

"The framework is there," he said. "Now we must fill it."