



COMING FULL CIRCLE

In 2021, Wilhelmsen announced a one-of-a-kind pilot project to reclaim and repurpose old mooring ropes. We spoke to Tore Strand about how the project has used circular supply methods to reduce waste and create value

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Consistently, safely, and efficiently disposing of waste in general remains a challenge for the shipping industry. As despite the guidelines laid out by MARPOL Annex V, the quality and availability of port reception facilities varies significantly. What if any of these materials can effectively be recycled or reused is another challenge altogether and its one Wilhelmsen Ships Service has started to untangle.

The company is looking into scalable solutions with an aim to find new applications for the 10,000 tons of retired ropes the industry produces every year. Part of that solution was to establish partnerships. Together with empower.eco, they launched the Circular Rope Project – a pilot project whose core purpose is to provide transparent and objective information to vessels and rope manufacturers that they can use to extend the lifetime of mooring ropes. So far so good.

“It’s tremendous how people are reacting,” says Tore Strand who is heading up the pilot. “I think because we have this cultural shift worldwide; people are becoming a lot more open to this kind of project. Time will tell how successful it is, but if we can scale it then I think we will start to see huge differences.”

The pilot is being trialled with ten Wallenius Wilhelmsen vessels, two management companies, the company’s internal mooring ropes team and the Timm Ropes by Wilhelmsen



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manufacturing plant in Slovakia. Under the project, used or retired mooring ropes are deposited in the port of Bremerhaven before being taken for analysis. From there, the ropes are tested for use in application, avoiding any energy-intensive mechanical recycling processes.

So far, some have ended going to retailers while others have been repurposed for use in industrial settings. It's a classic example of how circular supply chains can be used to meet sustainability goals. But does Tore think it will catch on?

"We have to bring the materials into the circular system," Tore says. "That's the goal. Part of what we are doing is gathering data, proving the concept works on a small scale and then showing it can be scaled to suit bigger organisations. But yes, I think this can change minds, and I think it will come into more widespread use."

transportation of used ropes from the vessel and how to categorise them. We couldn't label them as waste as they are retired ropes with recyclable potential. At the same time, we ran into the risk of breaking the rules by transporting them as ropes, but we weren't doing that at all.

"And though it might seem like a small problem, it underscores the need for the right partners and mindset for overcoming challenges in this type of project!

On a grander scale, there is a tacit understanding that for the initiative to succeed, its reach will have to extend beyond shipping and into other industries. Wilhelmsen Ships Service's current partnerships with empower.eco, the Norwegian Marine Cycling Cluster and industry associations Eurocord and The Cordage Institute form the bulk of its collaboration and current focus - though recently, it has started to look further afield.



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An aim to find new applications for the 10,000 tons of retired ropes the industry produces every year

COLLABORATION IS CRUCIAL

As with any sustainability initiative, collaboration is crucial, and this project is no different. On a practical level, establishing circular supply chains demands a focus on reverse logistics, which is drastically underdeveloped as far as environmental initiatives are concerned. It has proved challenging for Wilhelmsen and in unexpected ways, though there are signs that the bumps in the road have smoothed.

"It's been important for us to partner up in that respect with the right people and organisations," Tore says. "Being in the right ecosystem ensures that we have the knowledge and resources to address challenges and issues collectively. For example, one challenge we encountered was the

It's currently participating in the GloLitter Partnerships project run by the UN Global Compact and International Maritime Organization (IMO) and plans to extend itself further.

"We will continue to reach out to potential partners within and outside rope manufacturing to secure a new life for the materials in our products," Tore says. "In the long term, we could start bringing this kind of circular thinking back to the producer and ask them to redesign their product.

"I think it's a good end goal to design out as much waste as possible, to redesign the process entirely and not just from a supply chain perspective, from a product perspective too. There is a lot of competence around, and it's possible.

"That should definitely be our end goal."