

US court acquits Athenian officer

A Greek engineer has been cleared in California after a 12-month probe.

A Greek engineer is heading home for the first time in 20 months after being cleared of charges by a US court in a pollution-related "magic pipe" case.

Dimitrios Georgakoudis tells TradeWinds that he is on his way to Greece after eight months at sea and 12 months of investigation. He last left home in February 2006 at the age of 28 bound for a stint on Athenian Sea Carriers's 159,000-dwt crude tanker *Captain X Kyriakou* (built 2003).

He is set to board a plane after his acquittal today, aged 30.

Judge Lowell Jensen of the Eastern District of California federal court declared from the bench that he found the witnesses called by the US government "not credible".

The charges against Georgakoudis were based on testimony by six whistle-blowers from the engine-room crew. Some of them had worked alongside Georgakoudis daily for eight months and all came forward with the prospect of gaining a small fortune in rewards.

Speaking to TradeWinds by telephone from Sacramento just after the judge cleared him, Georgakis said: "I cannot change myself and the way I work with other people but it would be better if the government would start punishing people who tell lies."

Once he has spent some time at home with his parents, he plans to return to sea for Athenian and praises the Greek owner for sticking by him. "I was happy to have that company on my side," he said and adds that he will not hesitate to call at a US port after his experience.

"Of course. That's my job and I love my job," he answered. "If something like this ever happens again, I'm going to do the same as I did now: stand up for myself," he added.

Georgakoudis was ill and had his trial severed from that of his company and his boss in June, when Athenian and chief engineer Artemios Maniatis won an acquittal on similar charges that they had circumvented the suezmax's pollution-control system, deliberately spilled oily waste at sea and then covered it up.

Such Marpol-related charges have become popular with US Department of Justice (DoJ) prosecutors in recent years. Most by far have ended with plea-bargain deals, press releases from the DoJ's environmental-crimes section and large fines for the owners. The June victory was the first win ever by a shipowner who fought back.

The company's lawyer, Long Island maritime-criminal defender Mike Chalos, told TradeWinds at the time that the government had "created a monster" with its rewards scheme and that the Athenian decision should make them rethink their reliance on such testimony.

The DoJ nonetheless took Georgakoudis to trial and failed to prove its case a second time in what was essentially a tightened-up rerun of its case against Athenian, according to Chalos.

Chalos served as one of Georgakoudis's lawyers despite a DoJ attempt to stop him from representing the engineer. Jensen rejected the argument that Chalos's representation of Athenian created a conflict of interest.

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published: 26 October 2007