



Assarmatori president Stefano Messina welcomes support for Italy's hard-hit ropax and ro-ro operators. Photo: Ian Lewis

Italian shipowners hail \$100m state aid as 'important first step'

Messina applauds decrees designed to help owners hit by coronavirus

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By [Ian Lewis](#) in **London**

Stefano Messina says shipowners in Italy are finally getting the attention they deserve from their government after Rome unveiled a support package.

The Genoa shipowner believes Italian shipping has for too long played second fiddle to the land transport and aviation sectors.

Now, pressure applied by Italian shipping companies has resulted in the government pledging €85m (\$100m) in support for owners of ropaxes and ro-ros.



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Messina, who is chairman of shipowners' association Assarmatori, hailed the package as a great success. The organisation's members include 70% of the country's ro-ro and ropax operators.

Economic hit

The funds have been allocated in two government decrees issued in August designed to mitigate the economic impact of the pandemic.

The first decree provides Italy-flag cabotage owners with €35m-worth of support.

Owners in the intra-island and coastal trades will be extended fiscal advantages normally reserved for the country's international register, including measures to alleviate the cost of social security payments.

The second decree stipulates the creation of an emergency fund to cushion the economic blow of coronavirus on operators.

The government will provide an initial €50m to compensate for the loss of business from February to 31 December this year.

Distribution of the funds is expected to take place soon.

Assarmatori is involved in talks with government to create "a transparent and proportional" system for allocating the funds.

This is expected to take into account factors such as the numbers of passengers carried and crew employed.

Right direction

Messina sees the government decision as giving shipowners the kind of support that has been provided to aviation and rail.

"The decree represents an important first step, which does not work out all the problems, but is a move in the right direction," he said.

When coronavirus hit Italian shipping operators in February, the omens for state help were not good.

The only support offered by the government was an exemption from anchorage tax until the end of April. That paled in comparison with a €500m fund provided to the aviation sector.

The shipping measures were seen as not enough for a sector facing a shortfall of foreign tourists who account for 30% of the passengers transported by domestic cabotage operators in July and August.

Messina believes the government support partly reflects the pressure by Assarmatori, which was set up in January 2018 as an alternative to the longer-established Italian shipowners body Confitarma.



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Assarmatori members include Italy-flag operators, but also foreign companies with interests in the Italian market, such as Mediterranean Shipping Co and Evergreen's Italia Marittima.

In the past six months, the two Italian shipowners' associations have worked together to lobby government.

"It was a very intense period," said Confitarma president Mario Mattioli in a statement on the decrees.

He said Confitarma had worked incessantly to achieve goals that included measures to support the passenger sector, as well as the safety of crews.

"We know that it is not over yet and that there are many issues and challenges that await us," he added. [\(Copyright\)](#)