Any port area is a high fire-risk area, both because of the cargoes passing through (whether liquid or solid) and because of the intrinsic features of the wharves and the ships that dock there. In some cases this potential danger is increased by the fact that the port is an integral part of a city. Some ports are so much part of a town that incoming or outgoing port traffic may obstruct everyday city traffic or even bring it to a standstill. An inevitable consequence of this is delay in the arrival of rescue vehicles in the event of an emergency.

Even greater problems are presented by ports (the so-called industrial ports) which have wharves close to coastal depots or any kind of industrial plant. In such cases, a fire may not develop directly in the port area or on board ship but may break out in the surrounding areas and spread inside the port with potentially even more serious consequences.

Ports are not infrequently situated in positions considered at high risk from the point of view of environmental safety, so that it is necessary to have complete information about all the possible sources of danger in the zone, as well as about the vehicles, personnel, material and other means that can be immediately called into use in the event of emergencies due to external fires.

It is equally clear that the dangerous nature of the area surrounding the port may discourage the harbour master from authorizing the docking at particularly exposed wharves of ships carrying highly flammable goods or the loading and unloading of goods in particular dangerous packages (explosive or flammable goods, etc.).

These considerations underline the fact that the surrounding environment considerably affects not only port activities but also the general management policy of the particular port, and consequently all traffic options.

In Italy Law No. 690 of 13 May 1940 decrees that fire-fighting in ports is the responsibility of the commander of the port authority and is carried out by the provincial fire brigade. The harbour master directs all services for the prevention and extinction of fires in the port area, both on land and on board ships and barges, in full respect of the specific competences of the captains of military or merchant ships and the chiefs of fire brigades in relation to current regulations.
Every port possesses an adequate organization for the prevention, limitation and extinction of fires in the port area. This organization must be kept updated and in a state of continuous efficiency by the harbour master.

As regards the organization of fire-fighting, Italian ports can be divided into three categories. First- and second-category ports have special Port Detachments of the provincial fire authorities which possess not only normal land equipment but also nautical fire-fighting means and specially trained personnel for the prevention and extinguishing of fires aboard ship. Third-category ports do not possess these Port Detachments and the fire-fighting service is provided by the normal services of the provincial fire brigade, assisted when necessary by other services.

In Italy, regulations regarding fire prevention in port and aboard ship are laid down in the Italian Navigation Code, in the regulations as to its observation, in the safety regulations for merchant ships and human life at sea, in instructions issued at various times by the competent sections of the Ministry of the Merchant Navy, and in special norms relative to particular ports, as established by the harbour master in relation to local needs.

The prevention of port fires is one of the most demanding services performed by the military personnel of the port authorities for the safeguarding of public safety. This is an 'institutional' responsibility articulated in various police regulations that port authority personnel must ensure are enforced both on board ships in port (especially if carrying dangerous cargoes) and on land in the port area.

The action of the port authority military personnel can be integrated, if necessary, by that of other agents in the public forces (Art. 85 Ex. Reg. of the Navigation Code), without any prejudice to the authority of the harbour master.

It is clearly impossible to dictate absolute rules for the action necessary to extinguish fires because of the variety of conditions, means and situations and of the different natures of individual fires. There are, however, some fundamental criteria that fire brigades follow in their fire-prevention activity, in fire-fighting when fires have broken out, and for the protection of persons and the security of port installations and ships.

Fire prevention activity concerns every sector where fire is a potential danger, and in particular: on board ships anchored in port or offshore carrying flammable, explosive or otherwise dangerous cargoes; on board ships where there is welding work using oxyacetylene flames or electric arcs; in port depots or warehouses containing flammable goods; on board or near craft engaged in the loading of liquid or solid fuels; and during public events involving firework displays.

1. The port water plant must have a sufficient number of fire hydrants. The merchant navy administration has the power to oblige licensees of areas, buildings or any other property in the port area to organize their own fire prevention and fire-fighting services; it is also empowered to oblige the licensees of the water installations to organize their services in relation to fire-fighting necessities.