

Red tape cut for AirFish to fly

This is an occasional look at business ideas that have gained from the cutting of red tape. Today's is about how a special craft was allowed to take flight.

BY AARON LOW

A CRAFT that flies over sea on a cushion of air may conjure up fantasies for science fiction buffs, but for the regular bureaucrat, it has proved to be a nightmare.

The technology is so new that countries around the world have been unable to decide whether to classify the AirFish 8 - which can cruise 6m in the air over a mass of water, on an air cushion produced by aerodynamics - as a maritime vessel or an aircraft.

The hovercraft-like craft is faster and more efficient than traditional seaborne vessels, but, when Singapore investors formed Wigetworks in 2004, the technology fell into a Catch-22 situation.

To register the craft with the international maritime body - which is needed before AirFish 8 could be sold as a commercial vessel - they needed to conduct sea trials.

But to conduct such trials in Singapore, insurance was needed, and no insurer was willing to underwrite the craft unless it had passed sea trials.

To end this deadlock, Wigetworks turned to the Pro-Enterprise Panel (PEP), which helped them lobby government agencies such as the Maritime and Port Authority of Singapore and the Economic Development Board.

Mr Kenneth Tan, general manager of Wigetworks, said: "PEP helped reduce time and effort otherwise needed, which in turn helped reduce costs associated with the certification of our prototype vessel - a crucial step before any commercialisation of the technology could take place."

In 2008, sea trials for the craft were successfully conducted and the first AirFish 8 was registered as a Singapore vessel early this year.

Mr Tan said the company has already received much attention and is ready to receive orders and start production by the middle of next year. Wigetworks is now hoping for the Government to continue helping with other aspects of the project.



Wigetworks general manager Kenneth Tan, with the AirFish 8, which can cruise 6m in the air over a mass of water, on an air cushion produced by aerodynamics. ST PHOTO: AZIZ HUSSIN