Plain sailing: kite-like sails, such as this test model, may offer cargo ships fuel savings of some 15%.

Per Magne Einang, a research director at the Norwegian Marine Technology Research Institute in Trondheim, is studying whether natural-gas-burning combustion engines could efficiently power short-haul ships. Natural gas would be an affordable fuel, he says, especially as regulations against emissions of sulphur and nitrogen oxides become stiffer. Unfortunately, natural gas is only a little better than fuel oil when it comes to greenhouse-gas emissions — although it emits much less CO₂, not all of the methane gets burned and this, when emitted, is a much more potent greenhouse gas than CO₂.

A way around this might be to put the natural gas in fuel cells, says Tomas Tronstad, a project manager at DNV Research and Innovation in Oslo. DNV is fitting a 100-metre supply ship with a fuel cell made by the Munich company CFC Solutions that can run directly on natural gas. Tronstad says that this will result in 50% fewer greenhouse-gas emissions than a diesel engine. The fuel cell will be an auxiliary engine, complementing a conventional natural-gas combustion engine that drives an electric motor. But Tronstad says that eventually, similar fuel cells might be able to power a ship's engine completely.

Brinchmann says that such green innovations probably aren't affordable at the moment. But if fuel prices continue to rise as expected, he thinks the new designs may start looking much more attractive.

And with the possibility of emissions restrictions on the horizon, even more explosions in innovation may be coming, says Brinchmann: "We're still waiting for the big bang in this." ■

IN BRIEF

CRASH LANDING Rocketplane Kistler, a company in Oklahoma City that hopes to put tourists into space, is on the verge of losing up to \$207 million in government support. The company is one of two firms with which NASA has signed a Commercial Orbital Transportation Services agreement, which the space agency hopes will lead to alternative methods of flying cargo to the International Space Station (see *Nature* 448, 988–991; 2007). But Rocketplane has struggled to raise private financing as required by the deal, and NASA has now told it that if it cannot do so then its agreement may be terminated next month.

BLOOD BATTLE Biotech giant Amgen, which has suffered flagging sales and employee lay-offs in recent months, has been given a bit of a breather by the US Food and Drug Administration (FDA). An advisory panel has voted against requiring the company to add a label to several of its drugs to treat anaemia that would have specified the level of red blood cells patients should have before using the treatments. Had the change been enforced, it would probably have cut sales of the drugs. FDA regulators will make a final decision on the labelling later, but they usually take the advice of the advisory panels.

ENERGY SPIKE Crude-oil prices have topped \$80 a barrel on the New York Mercantile Exchange for the first time ever. Early last week, two reports from the US Energy Information Administration suggested that inventories of gasoline and crude oil were lower than expected. And six attacks on pipelines in Mexico, possibly by leftist rebels, have made the market nervous. The price spike comes even as the Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries said it would increase production by half-a-million barrels a day from November.

MARKET WATCH

The price of the right to emit a tonne of carbon has floated lazily around the €20 (US\$28) mark this summer. But one announcement did create a bit of a buzz at the five European carbon exchanges that trade the right to emit, including the European Energy Exchange in Leipzig, Germany (above).

On 30 August, the United Nations announced that the 'international transaction log' will be up in time for the markets' second phase, which starts in 2008. This will make it possible to transfer certified emission reductions (CERs) bought through the Clean Development Mechanism of the Kyoto Protocol to trading registries of the various Kyoto countries. Under the mechanism, credits for emissions-reduction projects in poorer countries can be bought by those in richer countries.

Before the announcement, trading in CERs was already brisk (see *Nature* 448, 974–975; 2007). But afterwards, even more players switched to dealing in CERs, leaving the allowances market flailing. The setback was short-lived, however, and overall, the spread in price between allowances and CERs has tightened in the past two months.

One factor putting downward pressure on the price of carbon emissions is rising coal prices, says analyst Milo Sjardin of New Carbon Finance in London. "The choice of either running a coal plant or a gas plant has gone more in favour of gas," says Sjardin. And when a company is looking to reduce emissions, switching to lower-emission natural gas from coal is an alternative to buying allowances, which lessens demand for these allowances.

Emma Marris