Norway to build first self-sailing electric cargo ship

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A computer simulation released by Yara International ASA shows the Yara Birkeland vessel

Norway plans to launch the first autonomous and fully electric cargo ship next year that the project's backers said Wednesday will save 40,000 truck journeys per year.

Fertiliser company Yara International has teamed up with industrial group Kongsberg to build the Yara Birkeland, which will haul fertilisers between three ports in southern Norway.

With a range of more than 65 nautical miles, the ship will be able to haul roughly 100 containers at a speed of 12 to 15 knots, according to the project's director, Bjorn Tore Orvik.

Initially the ship will be manned, but remote operation is expected to begin in 2019 and fully autonomous operation in 2020, the companies said.

"Every day, more than 100 diesel truck journeys are needed to transport products from Yara's Porsgrunn plant to ports in Brevik and Larvik where we ship products to customers around the world," Yara's chief executive Svein Tore Holsether said in a statement.

"With this new autonomous battery-driven container vessel we move transport from road to sea and thereby reduce noise and dust emissions, improve the safety of local roads, and reduce NOx and CO2 emissions," he added.

The switch is expected to reduce CO2 emissions by 678 tonnes per year, according to Yara, with the electricity used to charge the ship's batteries coming almost exclusively from hydro plants.

While Norway is a major oil producer it has been a leader in the adoption of electric cars thanks to generous tax incentives and has experimented with electric-powered ferries to cross its famous fjords.