



Puget Sound Steamship Operators Association

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U.S. Commission on Ocean Policy
1120 20th Street, NW
Suite 200 North
Washington, D.C. 20036

Re: Comments relevant to the Commission's Seattle Hearings

The Puget Sound Steamship Operators Association is a membership association comprised of commercial vessel owners, operators and agents whose vessels trade in the tidewater ports of Washington state. Our mission is to promote the growth and development of marine commerce in Puget Sound and Grays Harbor ports through strong business leadership that influences state and national economics and politics.

The PSSOA encourages sustained maritime trade in concert with the modern principles of environmental stewardship and will work to eliminate factors which unreasonably increase the cost and complexity of doing business in Washington State ports in order to provide a stable, reliable economic environment in which business can prosper.

In pursuit of this mission, the PSSOA has taken a leadership role in the local community to help achieve a healthy, thriving environment without jeopardizing trade.

A report card evaluating the region's success in achieving this was delivered by Secretary of Transportation Rodney Slater following a series of exhaustive studies.

FEDERAL REGISTER 11/24/98...SECRETARY RODNEY SLATER:

"Based on the findings in the Volpe Center's report, I hereby determine that the many existing elements of the region's marine transportation system comprise a safe system. While there are always areas for improvement - and we should always be looking into means for improving safety - the Volpe report shows that the Puget Sound area has an excellent system now."

In reaching this conclusion, Secretary Slater viewed the safety system as it existed in the fall of 1998. Some of the features of this system are outlined here:

1. The Puget Sound region was blessed by ancient glaciers and Providence with deep and wide navigational channels. Unique on the West Coast (perhaps the world) is the entrance to our port communities. The western end of the Strait of Juan de Fuca presents to the mariner an entrance that is 16 miles wide and is a refuge from storms whose quieter waters are protected from customary storm winds by the peaks of the Olympic mountains. This broad channel is extremely deep, measuring itself in the hundreds of fathoms. These deep waters are found throughout the traditional navigational system.
2. Overlaid on the Strait of Juan de Fuca and the entire navigation system is a traffic separation scheme

designed to provide maximum distance between meeting vessels and thus inhibit the potential for collision. In the Strait, the channel widths and separations are a mile or more in width.

3. Providing order and predictability to this navigating system is the Vessel Traffic radar System operated by the Canadian and U.S. coast guards. This system observes vessels on radar while they are many miles offshore and for the trip into the navigation system to the destination port. At every point in the voyage, the coast guard provides traffic and safety observations to the bridge crew of transiting vessels. This system is guided by a treaty between the U.S. and Canada and is of incalculable value in avoiding collisions and groundings.

4. Guiding transiting vessels in the maneuvering waters East of Port Angeles, the Puget Sound pilots and their Canadian counterparts impart local knowledge and expertise to the bridge crews of vessels trading in the region. These pilots are tested and operationally supervised by a special State Commission formed solely for that purpose.

5. In restricted waters, notably Port Angeles harbor, a local "Standard of Care" agreement between vessel operators and the USCG requires vessels going to anchor to engage a "ship assist" tug to help, as necessary, in maneuvering to and from its anchorage.

6. Also unique to the region, the "International Tug of Opportunity System" (ITOS) organizes powerful tugboats on both of the U.S. and Canadian sides of the International Boundary into a response system for the use of the appropriate coast guard. Through mutual agreement of the industry sectors on both sides of the border, about 125 tugs have been outfitted with electronic transmitters that make them visible whether they are in or out of radar coverage. This information is provided to the coast guard vessel traffic systems and is used to rapidly identify an appropriate response resource in the event of an emergency.

7. In addition to the features mentioned above, Secretary Slater's determination reflected upon the plethora of improved vessel operations and training elements introduced since the Exxon Valdez accident. These include, but are by no means limited to the introduction of ISM Code and STCW requirements.

All sectors of the region's vessel operating industry agreed not only with the Secretary's determination of safety, but also with the sentiment that we must strive to do more. In this spirit, the region has developed an even more robust safety system by adding the following features:

1. Voluntarily adopted Ballast Water management procedures that exceeded federal requirements and ultimately led to a public/private partnership with the state to pass and accept the nation's most demanding ballast water management regulations. These regulations uniquely present a date after which the issue of importation of non-indigenous species will be resolved.

2. Adopted a "Standard of Care" in collaboration with the USCG that amplifies vessel pre-arrival checks to specifically include the starting air system components. This responded to the root cause of the loss of propulsion of several vessels. Since its institution, this "Standard of Care" has reduced the incidence of propulsion loss due to starting air to zero.

3. Adopted a "Standard of Care" in collaboration with the USCG addressing the practice of underway maintenance wherein a vessel would shut down its plant to make minor repairs. Quite often, these repairs took considerably longer than expected, thus rendering the drifting vessel a candidate for grounding or collision. The "Standard of Care" required that any maintenance performed away from the dock be conducted at anchor in a recognized anchorage or be conducted in the presence of an escort tug. The Standard effectively resolved concerns about this issue.

4. Established a "Harbor Safety and Security Committee" that includes all stakeholders to resolve safety issues. The Commission received a separate briefing on this committee during the Seattle hearings.

5. Established through the state legislature a “Captain of the Port Tug Fund”. This is a quantity of funds dedicated to the use of the Captain of the Port (COTP) to begin a response for those events for which no other funding exists. An example might be the situation where the wind is freshening and the COTP knows that in a certain anchorage vessels tend to drag anchor when the wind increases beyond a certain level. Although none have dragged (yet) and although no incident has occurred (yet), the COTP can access this fund to pre-position a tug in the vicinity of the anchorage to be on-scene in the event the wind continues to rise and a vessel does indeed drag anchor. The fund could equally well be used at the West end of the Strait of Juan de Fuca by dispatching a tug there in anticipation of a deteriorating situation. This fund could also, in recognition that bad weather is not confined to only one place, be used to engage several tugs to protect several places miles distant from one another.

6. Established a “Marine Firefighting Commission” in anticipation of the USCG’s Salvage and Firefighting regulations. This Commission has already begun to organize local fire jurisdictions and to identify logistics and training requirements to mount a cohesive, comprehensive fire response anywhere in the region.

In all of these efforts, the PSSOA and other industry groups have attempted to push the safety envelope as far as possible without unbalancing the equilibrium existing between the Puget Sound trade region and its most ardent competitor in the nearby foreign country of Canada and province of British Columbia. We are well aware that most of the cargoes into this region are discretionary and that any extraordinary increase in the cost or hassle attendant to business with Puget Sound ports could easily send those cargoes to British Columbia ports. We have observed this occurring at the micro-level and must be constantly on guard against it occurring with a great number of vessels and their cargoes.

PSSOA encourages the Commission on Ocean Policy to recognize the region’s accomplishments and trade competitiveness sensitivity. In formulating your plans and recommendations, we encourage you complement our efforts and share our sensitivities.

An issue that has not been addressed adequately is the pressing need for consistency of regulation along the coast and throughout the nation. We urge you to formulate your recommendations so that any regulation flowing from them applies consistently throughout the nation. This mitigates in favor, then, of a strong central government regulator and avoids a confusing patchwork quilt of state regulations. We urge you to reinforce the USCG’s role as the nation’s maritime regulator, as the only regulator of vessels in interstate or international trade and, most importantly, that the USCG be fully funded to continue its safety function while homeland security is added to its many responsibilities.

Thank you for the opportunity to comment. If this letter creates questions, please do not hesitate to contact us.

Sincerely

Harry N. Hutchins
Executive Director