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ON THE COVER
Seacor Marine’s latest fast supply vessel, Liam J. McCall, powers down the Gulf Intracoastal Waterway and Atchafalaya River near Morgan City, La. Designed by Incat Crowther and built by Gulf Craft, the 194-foot FSV maximizes speed and passenger comfort to compete with offshore helicopter transport. See story, page 24. Photo by Brian Gauvin
US Customs proposes closing Jones Act equipment ‘loopholes’

U.S. Customs and Border Protection (CBP) has proposed revising more than two dozen rulings that relate to equipment transport under the Jones Act. Changing the rulings, which date to the mid-1970s, could create American jobs but also raise costs for oil exploration companies active in the Gulf of Mexico.

On Jan. 18, just before President Obama’s second term ended, CBP began soliciting public comments on its proposal to revise the government’s position that vessel equipment moved between domestic points is not “merchandise” that must be carried on U.S.-flag vessels. The proposal modifies and revokes ruling letters related to CBP’s application of the Jones Act. The agency, which is part of the Department of Homeland Security, first sought comments by Feb. 17, but later extended that deadline to April 18 and could lengthen it further.

“CBP has relied on a 1939 definition of vessel equipment, which provides the term ‘includes articles necessary and appropriate for the navigation, operation or maintenance of a vessel,’” said maritime attorney Charlie Papavizas at Winston & Strawn LLP in Washington, D.C. “Over time, CBP has issued numerous rulings interpreting this definition, including determining that vessel equipment included items ‘essential to the mission of the vessel.’”

Under Jones Act interpretations, if an item is merchandise, only a coastwise-qualified vessel can transport it between domestic points. If an item is vessel equipment, a non-coastwise-qualified vessel can move it between U.S. points and can transport it from one domestic point and install it at another domestic point. Jones Act transport prohibitions also apply to movements in U.S. territorial waters and those on the Outer Continental Shelf (OCS).

A CBP ruling in early 2009 determined that a subsea wellhead assembly known as a “Christmas tree” was vessel equipment when
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transported by a construction boat specializing in equipment installation. A Christmas tree assembly could be moved from one domestic point to another and then installed by a foreign-flag vessel. Vessels involved in pipe-laying and cable-laying, heavy-lift crane construction and installation, and diving support have been exempt from Jones Act requirements.

In July 2009, however, CBP proposed modifying or revoking years of Jones Act rulings about moving offshore oil equipment. Most of these rulings involved CBP determining whether certain items on vessels could be considered equipment. In the July 2009 proposal, CBP said withdrawal of the Christmas tree ruling was necessary pending a review of past rulings. But as controversy about the proposal grew, CBP removed it.

In March 2010, the agency initiated formal rulemaking using federal notice-and-comment procedures. In November 2010, that rulemaking approach was withdrawn by CBP, however.

Meanwhile, from May to October 2010, a federal OCS drilling ban following the Deepwater Horizon spill hurt Gulf oil output. At the time, critics said Jones Act restrictions kept specialist vessels out of the spill area, slowing the cleanup. After the ban, the oil and gas industry continued to conduct subsea installation and repair operations based on existing CBP rulings.

In December 2015, Congress passed legislation that included a requirement for CBP to enforce the Jones Act more thoroughly on the OCS. And last summer, to administer coastwise rules, CBP established a national Jones Act Division of Enforcement, or JADE, in its New Orleans field office.

Among the supporters of CBP’s new proposal are the American Maritime Partnership, the Shipbuilders Council of America, the Offshore Marine Service Association and a number of legislators from states producing offshore oil and gas. Opponents include some U.S. offshore producers and service companies, and foreign offshore oil, service and marine firms.

Allen Leatt, CEO of the International Marine Contractors Association in London, said the CBP’s proposal could revoke decades of decisions, creating a major shift in U.S. maritime policy.

“Naturally, we understand the drive to protect U.S. tonnage, given the difficulties in the platform supply vessel market today,” he said. Demand for supply vessels has declined sharply since oil prices tumbled in 2014. “But the deepwater construction market represents a very different sector, with very different vessels and technologies. It’s a truly international market. No single domestic market can support the heavy investments of these assets.”

The Gulf of Mexico’s offshore industry is at risk if the proposal is adopted, Leatt said, and he
warned that “unintended consequences haven’t been thought through.”

Sounding a different note, Thomas Allegretti, chairman of the American Maritime Partnership, said the CBP’s revocation notice corrects letters of interpretation and would close “loopholes” that give preference to foreign workers and shipbuilders. Closing these loopholes would bolster U.S. shipyards, which are critical to the nation’s economy and security, he said. More than 3,200 American jobs would be restored, he predicted.

Matthew Paxton, president of the Shipbuilders Council of America, echoed that sentiment. “This correction of past misinterpretations of the Jones Act will enable our shipyards to continue to supply, build, maintain and repair the essential vessels needed by the oil and gas industry,” he said.

As for the possible spark to domestic transport activity, “the offshore service industry is ready, willing and capable of completing this work, having recently invested $2 billion in U.S. shipyards on vessels tailored to safely complete it,” said Aaron Smith, president of the Offshore Marine Service Association.

U.S. Rep. Duncan Hunter, R-Calif., chairman of the House Subcommittee on Coast Guard and Maritime Transportation, said he hopes the CBP’s proposal will be the start of “an even stronger transition in favor of the Jones Act across the entire federal government.”

In January, the Trump administration called for a temporary freeze on new federal regulations pending a review of all regulatory initiatives, Leatt noted. “President Trump is ambitious to increase domestic oil and gas production,” he said. “But CBP’s latest Jones Act proposal seems to run contrary to those objectives.”

Susan Buchanan

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Coast Guard plans to raise monetary thresholds for casualty reporting

The U.S. Coast Guard is proposing to raise the monetary thresholds for reporting property damage resulting from a marine casualty and serious marine incident (SMI), both to mitigate any undue liability vessel owners and operators face and to temper the resources expended by the service to investigate these incidents.

The current thresholds for marine casualty reporting were implemented back in the 1980s and have not been amended. Thus, values have not kept pace with inflation. As a result, vessel personnel must fill out a CG-2692 marine incident report on relatively minor casualties that often prompt a Coast Guard investigation.

Coast Guard spokeswoman Amy Midgett said the service periodically reviews regulations “to ensure they are appropriate and effective.” In line with that policy, in January 2014 the service announced the availability of a Navigation and Vessel Inspection Circular (NVIC) addressing marine casualty reporting procedures. Since that time, the Coast Guard has invited public input “on its efforts to provide amplifying guidance on incidents that constitute reportable marine casualties,” she said.

“Several industry groups identified the lack of inflation adjustment for the regulatory thresholds that required Coast Guard notification and mandatory post-casualty chemical testing,” Midgett said.

Capt. Al Bernstein, owner of BB Riverboats in Cincinnati, Ohio, said he took the initiative to address the Department of Homeland Security and the Coast Guard early on about the need for updating the thresholds. “For a long time, I have been pleading with the Coast Guard to increase the dollar thresholds that trigger reporting require-
ments for a marine casualty and serious marine incident,” he said.

Currently, a marine casualty amounting to $25,000 or more necessitates a Coast Guard investigation. “As a result,” Bernstein said, “mariners have had to submit numerous unnecessary casualty reports, an administrative burden which takes away from our core missions and exposes vessel operators to potentially costly legal and media scrutiny.”

A Notice of Proposed Rulemaking (NPRM) posted in the Federal Register in January of this year indicated that the Coast Guard is working toward updating monetary property damage thresholds from $25,000 to $72,000 for reporting a marine casualty, and from $100,000 to $200,000 for an SMI. Purportedly, these changes could save industry stakeholders and the federal government an estimated $6.8 million over 10 years.

Midgett said an adjustment for inflation will bring thresholds in line with the initial regulatory intent to require chemical testing for the more serious incidents. The regulations, as proposed, “would allow both industry and Coast Guard personnel to focus upon higher-consequence incidents that are more likely to produce lessons learned that will assist in the prevention of accidents in the future,” she said.

“It now appears that our hard work is paying off,” Bernstein said. Yet, while he welcomed the modifications, he also had hoped the proposal would have an automatic indexing feature. “This would ensure that future threshold adjustments will account for increases in the consumer price index without going through the formal rulemaking process,” Bernstein said. “The proposed rule does not do this, and we should continue to strongly encourage it.”

The period for public comment on the NPRM closed on March 24. Midgett said the timeline for the final rule will be determined “based upon public feedback (the Coast Guard) receives and future agency considerations.”

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Advances in the development of autonomous vessels are leading marine insurers into uncharted waters with new risks for the sector but also potential benefits compared to insuring crewed vessels.

Capt. Andrew Kinsey, senior marine risk consultant at Allianz Global Corporate & Specialty, said autonomous operation presents a tremendous number of unknowns regarding risk, but he pointed out that the maritime industry has experience in this area.

“The issue of autonomous vessel operation has been dealt with before on board ships, when we first started with unattended engine room operations,” he said. “In that case, the vessels were operated in a manned state and engine room alarms were logged and analyzed.”

Kinsey believes that fully autonomous vessels will face the same scrutiny.

“This is not going to be a case where one day we just flip a switch and take the crews off,” he said. “I believe the bigger question is, how can we bring this technology on board current vessels and make them safer to operate while manned?”

Kinsey is forthright, stating, “This should not be a race to cut costs, but to instead make vessel operations safer and therefore save money.”

Alan Jervis, a chartered insurer at Alan Jervis Resources International, said autonomous vessel technology could provide advantages, the most obvious concerning personnel.

“A potentially very large positive from an insurance/risk management perspective is that the risks inherent in having a crew will be significantly reduced or virtually eliminated,” he said. “Hence, insurers will be less concerned with claims rising from injury and/or loss of life at sea. Crew who were formerly charged to run a vessel at sea will eventually be able to operate the vessel from a safe remote location on land.”

Jervis said the key will be proper management of the technology to handle all events, foreseen and unforeseen, including engine or mechanical breakdown on the open seas, extreme heavy weather, piracy and pollution. “Regulatory controls, however, will be in place,” he said.

Needless to say, cost will play its part, with comparisons to conventional vessels emerging in many forms. For example, Jervis differentiates between insurance on the hulls of autonomous vessels and protection and indemnity (P&I) insurance.

“Regarding unmanned vessel hulls, these will be new initially and, because of sophisticated technology, will result in higher values, in turn creating a challenge for insurers to produce sufficient capacity to insure such high values,” he said. “P&I, covering the liability of the vessel, means that crew claims for loss of life or personal injury will be substantially reduced if not almost entirely eliminated.”

Kinsey said autonomous vessels will have numerous costs that conventional vessels don’t have.

“There will be the onboard infrastructure as well as the shore-side infrastructure; all of these costs will have to be evaluated so that operators can make an educated decision whether the cost savings are viable,” he said. “Regarding insurance costs, in many ways it will be the same as conventional vessels — rates being based on the risks that are present. Given the lack of hard data available at this point in time, any discussion of rates would be purely hypothetical.”

One of the biggest challenges for insurers will be assessing the risk of an environmental disaster.
when autonomous vessels take to the sea. Without a crew, a disaster-containment response team may be hundreds of miles away.

“This is definitely a concern,” Jervis said. “Under the current system, in the event of a maritime disaster, a crew may be able to respond quickly and effectively to prevent or mitigate a loss (for example, put out a fire). In effect, with the eventual introduction of unmanned vessels, there has to be technology present to do the same thing. … Yet the flip side to this is that with automation, human error is also reduced. So if the technology is sound, there is an argument that the chances of a man-made disaster are significantly reduced.”

Kinsey said if any vessel, autonomous or conventional, has a serious engineering casualty and a subsequent environmental incident, it is a tragedy.

“One of the key aspects of my job is to attempt to get in front of the loss and break the chain of events,” he said. “Accidents are preventable and it is of utmost importance that we remember that fact and use all available means to achieve that.”

Jervis said that although autonomous technology already exists, it needs testing and re-testing on the high seas as well as regulatory approval. Kinsey did not supply a timetable for when the concept might be viable, believing that the changes will be made only when it makes economic sense to operators. In this respect, the need for significant changes in engineering points to newbuilds determining the course.

One of the most ambitious timelines involves an effort by Automated Ships Ltd. and Kongsberg Maritime. The partners announced plans last year to build Hronn, the first unmanned and fully automated offshore supply vessel, and have it on the water in 2018.

Michael Schwartz
A long-standing legal battle between the Seafarers’ International Union of Canada (SIUC) and the federal government over foreign workers engaged in shipping in Canadian waters was settled on Feb. 15, mere days before a lengthy court case was due to start.

The SIUC filed 42 lawsuits in 2015 alleging that instead of providing Canadian seafarers with the opportunity to work, and in violation of the Temporary Foreign Worker Program (TFWP), the government of Canada was systematically issuing work permits to non-Canadian crewmembers of hundreds of foreign vessels engaged in shipping in Canada. The SIUC found evidence that some of these temporary foreign workers made as little as $2.41 per hour while working in Canada when they should have been paid the Canadian prevailing wage. In July 2016, the SIUC filed an additional 13 lawsuits with similar allegations.

That same month, the government of Canada admitted that it improperly issued work permits to the foreign crewmembers of New England, a Marshall Islands-flagged oil tanker that engaged in shipping in Canada. The union argued that the permits were in direct violation of the Coasting Trade Act, which requires that ships carrying passengers or goods between Canadian ports (cabotage) may only use foreign workers if no qualified Canadian workers are available.

“In the last two years, we’ve seen 4,000 temporary foreign workers on ships that came in under a Transport Canada waiver to run cabotage,” SIUC President James Given told Professional Mariner. “We have been running at 11.5 percent unemployment over the last two years. That is just us, not including the non-union seafarers.”

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Last year, the SIUC delivered a submission on TFWP and its impact on Canadian seafarers to the federal government’s Standing Committee on Human Resources, Skills and Social Development. The union said the program, together with the growing use of foreign-flagged vessels in Canada, has cost Canadians more than 2,100 jobs to date.

In the settlement, Employment and Social Development Canada (ESDC) agreed to terms that include the following:

• Conducting a full review of the agency’s policies and procedures regarding the employment of temporary foreign workers on foreign-flagged vessels engaged in Canadian domestic shipping. The agency will consult with SIUC on the format of stakeholder discussions and the union will have a seat at the table.

• Immediately issuing a directive to ESDC officers to enforce provisions requiring employers who are looking to hire foreign workers to crew vessels to first advertise the positions to Canadian seafarers to prove that there are none available.

• Carefully considering and commencing investigations into the SIUC’s allegations that seafarers admitted to work in Canada as temporary foreign workers are not being paid the proper Canadian prevailing wage and, in some cases, are being paid below the Canadian minimum wage.

“After 18 months of litigation, I am very happy to see the government finally agree to what we sought all along — enforcement and a review of the rules with the full participation of SIU Canada,” Given said in a prepared statement. “We are confident that the terms of the settlement will lead to hundreds of jobs for Canadian seafarers who are qualified and available to crew marine vessels of all sizes and types.”

Michel Drouin
Failure to relieve crewmembers on time is one of the biggest contributors to fatigue and lack of motivation at sea, according to a study conducted by InterManager and seven academic partners.

In the three-year Project Martha, InterManager, a trade association for in-house and third-party ship managers, gathered data from more than 1,000 mariners from two Chinese state-run carriers and two Europe-based carriers. The mariners completed questionnaires, kept diaries and wore activity-tracking devices to capture their on- and off-duty activities and sleep patterns.

The study found a growing level of fatigue related to the stress and intellectual challenge of their jobs, particularly among masters and watchkeepers. The simplest step that vessel operators can take to help reduce stress and fatigue is to relieve mariners on schedule, said Capt. Kuba Szymanski, secretary-general of InterManager.

“If a seafarer is told he or she will be at sea for two months, they are fine, but if you tell them at two months, ‘We can’t actually relieve you now,’ that’s when motivation plummets and fatigue worsens,” Szymanski said. “The shore staff needs to think of better ways of arranging crew relief.”

Since the release of the study in 2016, InterManager has been conducting workshops with vessel operators in Athens, Singapore, Manila, Cyprus and Southampton, England, to discuss the findings and encourage attention to “low-hanging fruit” — simple steps that can make a big difference in the lives of seafarers.

Top factors that crewmembers said contributed to fatigue were job security, environmental issues, job demands, sleep quality, irregular work hours, the number of rest hours, and new regulations that could place more requirements on seafarers.

The study also made a point to differentiate sleepiness and fatigue. According to the study, sleepiness is simply the state of being sleepy, which can be addressed by going to sleep. By contrast, fatigue is a subjective feeling of tiredness that is distinct from weakness and has a gradual onset.

Sean Kline, director of maritime affairs for the Chamber of Shipping of America, said mariners have been subjected to a “regulatory tsunami” of rules relating to environmental management, electronic charting and cybersecurity, to name a few.

“We have to make sure that fatigue management doesn’t drop to the bottom of the priority list, especially when you consider the studies that compare it to impaired driving,” he said.

Masters reported that they suffer more fatigue than other crewmembers because of the demands of the job in terms of hours on duty as well as management of all activities on a vessel.

Port calls can be particularly stressful for the master and crew, the study found. In addition to cargo operations, they also may have to deal with crew changes, inspections from port states and classes, bunkering and replenishing stores. Port operators expect vessels to vacate berths as quickly as possible to accommodate other vessels, so there’s little to time to rest while tied up.

“So ship masters after three or four months are really, really fatigued,” Szymanski said. “While they do go to bed, they may not have good quality of sleep because of the demands of the job.”

The intellectual aspects of seafaring are more demanding than the physical aspects, the study found, as mariners are expected to keep pace with new technology and regulations on board.

“Our study showed clearly that those who work physically on board the ship are not as fatigued as those who are working mentally,” Szymanski said.
Some deepwater vessel operators have started using an additional third mate to help spread the workload to mitigate fatigue, according to Klaus Luhta, chief of staff for the International Organization of Masters, Mates & Pilots.

While seafarers share responsibility for using their rest time properly, it’s patronizing for shore-side managers to expect to have more control of mariners’ off-duty time than they do for land-based employees, Szymanski noted.

“So these ship masters after three or four months are really, really fatigued. While they do go to bed, they may not have good quality sleep because of the demands of the job.”

Capt. Kuba Szymanski, InterManager

“"We shouldn’t have two standards — one standard for people ashore, so when you come off-duty you can do whatever you like, but when you’re at sea you can’t," he said.

Gary Wollenhaupt
A ruling by the Federal Maritime Commission (FMC) that allows a group of foreign roll-on/roll-off carriers to jointly negotiate and contract for U.S. tugboat services has alarmed the industry.

The commission voted 4-1 in January to permit four companies in a shipping alliance to negotiate as a group and sign joint contracts with individual U.S. tug operators. It is an amendment to a cooperative working agreement already approved by the commission. Prior to the amendment, the parties were required to negotiate separately for tug services.

Commissioner William Doyle was the sole member of the panel who opposed the amendment. He said that the ruling gives too much negotiating power to the shipping companies and will harm the industry.

“Allowing this group of foreign-flag ro-ro carriers to use their collective marketing power anywhere in the United States to drive down domestic tug rates has a knock-on effect not just on tug service providers but to the manufacturing side as well — the (shipbuilders) and boatbuilders,” Doyle told Professional Mariner.

Caitlyn Stewart, director of regulatory affairs for the American Waterways Operators, said the AWO was disappointed in the ruling because it runs counter to decisions on other shipping alliance agreements made by the FMC last year. She also does not want the ruling to affect future decisions.

“We want to make sure this does not set a precedent for the amendment of other agreements,” she said.
Buckley McAllister, president of McAllister Towing and Transportation, said he was pleased with the AWO’s position. “We totally agree with the position of the AWO and find it ironic that the federal government is permitting these international companies to bargain jointly for domestic U.S. services,” he said.

The amendment, approved at a Jan. 19 meeting, allows four companies — Norway-based Wallenius Wilhelmsen Logistics (WWL), American Roll-on Roll-off Carrier (ARC) of Woodcliff Lake, N.J., and EUKOR Car Carriers Inc. and Hyundai Glovis Co., both of South Korea — to engage in joint negotiations with U.S. tug operators starting Jan. 23. WWL is joint owner of ARC and EUKOR. WWL and EUKOR ran afoul of the maritime commission last year. In October, they agreed to pay a $1.5 million civil penalty to settle allegations of collusion with other ocean carriers to enter into contracts without approval of the FMC.

One of the four commissioners who voted in favor of the amendment said staff economic analysis showed there would be no harmful effects to the nation’s ports or domestic companies. “Careful analysis of what was proposed yielded no concerns about potential anticompetitive behavior or adverse consequences to ports or the American shipper,” FMC Chairman Mario Cordero said in a news release.

Doyle disagreed. Not only does the decision give the ro-ro carriers an unfair bargaining advantage, he said, but it also goes beyond the scope of the Shipping Act of 1984. “It is disingenuous to believe that legislators involved with the drafting and amending (of) the Shipping Act intended to allow foreign-flag ocean common carriers to use their collective marketing

Harley Marine opens era of Tier 4 tractor tugs in United States

Harley Marine Services of Seattle has taken delivery of Earl W. Redd, the first U.S. tractor tug that meets EPA Tier 4 emissions limits and the first tugboat using a selective catalytic reduction system (SCR) to comply with the stricter federal standards.

The 120-by-35-foot tug is powered by twin Caterpillar 3516 engines each producing 2,675 hp at 1,600 rpm linked with Rolls-Royce US 255-P30 FP z-drives. Each engine is paired with a urea-based SCR aftertreatment system installed above the engine compartment that converts nitrogen oxide in diesel exhaust to nitrogen and water vapor. The system is expected to exceed federal emissions requirements.

The versatile Earl W. Redd has a Markey hawser winch on the bow and Markey towing winch on the stern to accomplish a wide range of services, including salvage and rescue towing. However, with a bollard pull of 75 tons, the vessel is also suited for docking and ship-assist jobs.

Other components on the tug include twin John Deere 125-kW generators and Schuyler rubber fendering. Earl W. Redd has an oversized 127,000-gallon fuel tank to allow for long voyages, and an 8,200-gallon urea tank.

Jensen Maritime Consultants of Seattle provided plans for the tugboat, which was built by Diversified Marine of Portland, Ore., at its shipyard along the Columbia River. The tug is named for shipyard owner Kurt Redd’s father, who was a long-time presence at the yard.

Casey Conley
power to disadvantage the U.S. maritime sector’s service providers like tugs, barges, feeders, container lessors and chassis providers,” Doyle said.

Critics said another major problem with the decision is that tug operators cannot form ro-ro companies and are reluctant to openly criticize the decision, even though it could be financially damaging. Although the FMC did not reject the amendment, it does not change existing laws protecting domestic companies. It is dropped language allowing for joint contracting after objections from the industry.

Last summer, the FMC raised concerns about a vessel services agreement sought by a group of four international shipping companies called the Ocean Alliance. Industry officials objected because they said the agreement could allow joint contracting by the alliance with port terminal facilities and marine terminal services, in addition to tug and barge services. The Ocean Alliance is composed of China COSCO Shipping, CMA CGM of France, Orient Overseas Container Line (OOCL) of Hong Kong, and Evergreen Line of Taiwan.

Underlying the debate over the FMC’s January decision are questions about the Shipping Act of 1984 and whether it applies to the tug industry. Stewart said the AWO “was surprised and deeply troubled by the FMC’s decision because it is the first time in our industry’s long history that we have been drawn into the regulatory orbit of the FMC, which we do not believe is appropriate or consistent with Congress’ intent.”

The FMC approved both shipping alliance agreements after the joint contracting language was removed by the companies.

The Ocean Alliance. Industry officials objected because they said the agreement could allow joint contracting by the alliance with port terminal facilities and marine terminal services, in addition to tug and barge services. The Ocean Alliance is composed of China COSCO Shipping, CMA CGM of France, Orient Overseas Container Line (OOCL) of Hong Kong, and Evergreen Line of Taiwan.

In November, a group of five companies called the Transport High Efficiency Alliance sub-

their own alliances. The joint contracting provision “would allow ocean carriers to gain an advantaged bargaining position because domestic entities have no counterbalancing ability to take collective action with immunity from the antitrust laws of the United States,” wrote AWO President Thomas Allegretti in a Jan. 4 letter to the FMC.

The decision has put tug operators in an awkward position. While the industry opposes the FMC ruling, the operators have long-standing relationships with the also possible the decision could be appealed in the federal court system.

The AWO is meeting with the commissioners to discuss the implications of this decision. Stewart’s understanding is that if the companies in the working agreement file contracts under the new amendment, the FMC will have to review those contracts.

“If it results in anti-competitive activity, we have recourse,” she said.

The ruling was unexpected by many; last year, two other international shipping alliances admitted a vessel services agreement to the FMC that would have allowed the companies to jointly negotiate and sign contracts with domestic tug operators, barge and feeder services, or providers of other vessel-related goods and services. The alliance is composed of Hapag-Lloyd of Germany, Yang Ming Marine Transport of Taiwan, and Japan-based Nippon Yusen Kabushiki Kaisha Ltd. (NYK), Mitsui O.S.K. Lines and Kawasaki Kisen Kaisha Ltd. (“K” Line).

The FMC approved both shipping alliance agreements after the joint contracting language was removed by the companies.

The FMC approved both shipping alliance agreements after the joint contracting language was removed by the companies. The Ocean Alliance. Industry officials objected because they said the agreement could allow joint contracting by the alliance with port terminal facilities and marine terminal services, in addition to tug and barge services. The Ocean Alliance is composed of China COSCO Shipping, CMA CGM of France, Orient Overseas Container Line (OOCL) of Hong Kong, and Evergreen Line of Taiwan.

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From the wheelhouse of the single-screw Kaleen McAllister, Capt. Byshe Hicks watched as the giant con-ro got underway from a Baltimore Harbor terminal.

The pilot aboard Grande Sierra Leone, Bruce Morse-Ellington, ordered Kaleen amidships while the ship’s powerful thrusters pushed the bow away from the terminal. The 102-foot Kaleen idled against the hull and waited for the pilot’s next command.

“OK, Kaleen, you can stop, back away and just hang out on the port-side midships area,” Morse-Ellington, with the Association of Maryland Pilots, said over radio. Hicks confirmed the order and pushed the tug backward using its single z-drive.

This was a straightforward job for Hicks and deck hand Todd Sauerwald, both of whom joined McAllister about three years ago. The night before, the pair docked the 695-foot Italian-flagged Grande Sierra Leone into Dundalk’s Pier 13. Now Kaleen’s job was to escort the ship to a terminal across the harbor. For the early part of the voyage, the tug remained against the ship’s hull, riding alongside the massive vessel.

“This ship is maneuvering fine so he is not even calling us up to the bow,” Hicks said as Grande Sierra Leone chugged toward the main channel. “A lot of times we are basically insurance. We are there to make sure nothing goes wrong.”

The 3,300-hp Kaleen McAllister left the company’s Locust Point pier at about 2300 on Feb. 27, shortly after McAllister’s two other Baltimore tugs, the 5,100-hp
Bridget McAllister and 4,000-hp Timothy McAllister, departed to assist a ship at a nearby coal terminal.

With jazz playing softly in the background, Hicks guided Kaleen around Locust Point past Fort McHenry, which British ships attacked over two days in September 1814 during the War of 1812. Francis Scott Key witnessed the bombardment and the fort’s survival, and the poem he wrote later became “The Star-Spangled Banner.”

Hicks pointed Kaleen southwest in the Patapsco River toward the Francis Scott Key Bridge, which marks the harbor’s edge. About this time, he handed the controls to Sauerwald, who holds a 200-ton license and is pursuing his 500-ton credential.

Kaleen was making about 8.8 knots — just under the 9-knot harbor speed limit — when a flock of Canada geese arose from the water just in front of the tug. Otherwise, it was an uneventful leg.

Kaleen was one of the few vessels underway. The container port at Seagirt Marine Terminal, with its massive white post-Panamax cranes, was quiet. Across Colgate Creek, vehicles, farm machinery, construction equipment and other rolling cargo sat neatly in rows awaiting their next move at Dundalk Marine Terminal.

Baltimore has one of the busiest ports in the country, with active container and ro-ro terminals and dry-bulk facilities that handle grain, coal, sugar, paper, wood products and countless other materials. Maryland Port Administration data shows 10.1 million tons of cargo moved through Baltimore’s public terminals in 2016, a 5 percent increase and a new record. Data shows those terminals are off to a strong start in 2017, with volumes up more than 12 percent compared with January 2016.

Those figures do not include private terminals around the harbor that moved additional cargoes, according to a port spokesman.

Despite its activity, Baltimore Harbor is a relatively comfortable place to work. The harbor itself is relatively small and the Patapsco River has little current and minor tidal swings, although wind can be a challenge. It also can get hectic in the late afternoon and early morning when the largest ships tend to come and go.

“When everyone is trying to leave at once or is coming at once, it’s kind of like a traffic jam,” Hicks said. “There are some piers that are challenging. The Fort McHenry pier that we have, it’s a skinny slip and you don’t have much room for the tugs.”

McAllister’s tugs split most of the ship docking jobs with Moran Towing and another small operator, said Mike
Reagoso, vice president and general manager for McAllister Towing of Baltimore. The company employs about 20 people who work two-and-two turns, meaning two weeks on, then two weeks off. Much of the docking and assist work in Baltimore happens between 1500 and 0600 hours.

Grande Sierra Leone, operated by Grimaldi Lines, was almost ready to transit when Kaleen rounded the point at the Dundalk terminal at 2120. About 10 minutes later, the ship was underway. It has a wide, boxy stern for ro-ro cargo and an open foredeck for cargo containers. The forward hull has a sharp flare leading to a bulbous bow.

The con-ro cleared the terminal and turned to starboard, cutting across an anchorage en route to the 50-foot-deep main channel. The ship was drawing 31 feet, leaving plenty of room between it and the harbor’s soft bottom.

During the next 15 minutes, Morse-Ellington spoke several times with the pilot aboard the 958-foot bulker KSL Santiago, which took a load of coal at Baltimore’s CNX Marine Terminal. McAllister’s two other tugs, Bridget and Timothy, were alongside to swing the ship’s bow around for outbound transit.

“OK man, we’re dropping lines. I guess we’ll slowly work our way out and let you get through there,” Santiago’s pilot said to his counterpart.

“All right, yeah, we’re rolling here. We won’t hold you up too long,” Morse-Ellington responded.

Kaleen stayed alongside the port-side hull as Grande Sierra Leone accelerated to 12.5 knots in the main channel. Red and green channel lights, one at Fort McHenry, the other atop Under Armour’s headquarters, marked the vessels’ position safely within the boundaries. The Dundalk terminal is about three miles southeast of South Locust Point 12, the ship’s destination in a section of the harbor known as the Ferry Bar Channel, and the vessels covered the distance quickly.

“Kaleen, can I get you to hop on over to the starboard side?” the pilot asked as the vessels approached a slight turn into the channel.

“Where do you want me? Amidships again?” Hicks responded.

“Yeah, that should do for a while. She doesn’t turn so hot to starboard, so I will probably need you to shift the quarter around when we reach the turn into the channel there,” Morse-Ellington said.

Hicks, who retook Kaleen’s controls before the ship left the terminal, acknowledged the pilot’s order and spun the tug counterclockwise. As the ship moved ahead, Hicks went around the stern and took a position alongside the starboard hull awaiting the next order.

Kaleen is a former Navy YTB tugboat — Pontiac, built by Southern Shipbuilding in 1961. McAllister acquired it in 2000 and two years later installed an EMD 16-645-E5 turbo engine and a Schottel 1515 CP z-drive. Nine years later, the company installed an EMD 12-710 G7C Tier 2 engine and twin John Deere generators with help from a federal stimulus grant.

McAllister has 11 former YTBs in its roughly 60- vessel fleet, and nine have been...
converted into twin-screw tractor tugs. Donal G. McAllister, which formerly worked in Baltimore but is now in Charleston, S.C., is the company's other single-screw tractor tug.

Kaleen is known as a forgiving boat with plenty of power for ship docking and assist. It’s nimble and quick thanks to the z-drive.

“You can do things with it you can’t do with a regular single-screw. We can ... spin around in our own length, we have really good control going backward — I can drive the boat just as well going backward as I can going forward,” Hicks said.

“What the pilots really like is we can stay on a 90 just by turning the (z-drive) unit 90 degrees,” he continued. “We can be on the 90 and give direct push or pull.”

The tug has a spacious interior originally meant for 11 people. These days, it normally sails with two people, and Reagoso said it mainly works within the harbor.

From time to time, Kaleen is dispatched to an oil terminal at Piney Point, Md., about 10 hours south, or Sparrow’s Point just outside the harbor.

Once Kaleen was in position, the pilot ordered it to get a line up on Grande Sierra Leone’s starboard quarter. Hicks eased off on the throttle while the ship continued forward, then spun the tug 180 degrees so its bow faced the ship’s stern. Sauerwald went down to the deck and prepared to attach the line.

Sauerwald pulled the 7-inch Samson Neutron rope through the bow staple and grabbed about 5 feet of line in both hands, forming a U-shape. He swung the rope straight back over his head, then stepped forward and wrapped it around a hull chock. Hicks hauled in the line using the JonRie InterTech Series 200 bow winch to create the proper tension.

With Kaleen’s assistance, the ship’s stern swung modestly starboard near the entrance to Ferry Bar Channel just south of Locust Point. Nearby, KSL Santiago started backing into the main channel with help from the two other McAllister tugs.

Soon, Morse-Ellington ordered Kaleen to haul in its line and for Grande Sierra Leone to get a line out on the port quarter for docking. Hicks crossed behind the stern and Sauerwald reattached the line. Hicks guided the tug toward the ship as it prepared to dock with help from the tug and its thrusters. On the pilot’s command, Hicks pivoted 90 degrees to begin pushing the ship into its berth.

“Come ahead one bell, Kaleen,” Morse-Ellington said, referring to the half-ahead order on the tug’s engine.

Moments later, the pilot asked the lineman on the pier how the ship looked.

“The way she is coming in now, she will be just about in position,” the lineman responded.

“OK, I’ll get her stopped then,” the pilot said before ordering Kaleen to idle.

Moments later, Morse-Ellington ordered Kaleen to stop.

“All stop,” Hicks said.

The pilot checked distances and the lineman suggested moving another 10 meters astern. He ordered Kaleen to idle and then to easy-ahead until the lineman announced the ship was in position.

“All right, Byshe, you can stop and get your line, we are all finished with you,” Morse-Ellington said. “Have a good evening and a good morning.”

Grande Sierra Leone was Kaleen’s only job that night. That was OK with Hicks and Sauerwald, who worked most of the previous night. Hicks guided the tug around Fort McHenry and back into McAllister’s pier on the other side of Locust Point. By 0130, both were heading home, looking forward to a good night’s sleep.

His shift over, Capt. Byshe Hicks, left, prepares for the ride home. He commutes to work from his home in Baltimore’s historic Fell’s Point neighborhood by bicycle, even in winter.
Seacor Marine’s sparkling new fast supply vessel, Liam J McCall, cut through the gloom of a dismal morning on the rising Atchafalaya River near Morgan City, La. When Capt. Rick Oliver thrust the five throttles forward, the deep-V bow of the vessel quickly and powerfully rose through the muddied and foliage-littered water.

When Seacor Marine and McCall Boat Rentals merged in 1996, Norman McCall and his son, Joe, came in the bargain. The McCalls had built a highly reputable fleet of fast crew boats plying the Gulf Coast oil fields. Bolstered by the international profile of Seacor and the escalation of deep-water drilling in the gulf, the pair spearheaded the development of crew boats into fast supply vessels. Other companies followed suit, but with amazing consistency, Seacor has continually launched innovations that have boosted FSV capability and performance.

The 194-foot Liam J McCall, part of the Express Plus-Plus class from Seacor, represents the latest evolution of that development. Designed by Incat Crowther’s Lafayette, La., office and built by Gulf Craft in Franklin, La., the vessel is noted for passenger comfort, speed, deck cargo capacity and emergency evacuation capability.

“Seacor’s seventh-generation FSV designs are focused on maximum speed while maintaining crew and passenger comfort,” said Joe McCall, senior project manager for Seacor.

Liam J McCall’s 36-knot light speed is provided by five Cummins QSK60 engines rated at 2,680 horsepower each (13,400 hp total) at 1,900 rpm, Twin Disc MGX-61500SC marine gears with 2.56:1 reduction ratios, and HamiltonJet HT810 waterjets. The five engines and three 200-hp Thrustmaster bow tunnel thrusters provide a great deal of redundancy and stationkeeping precision.

Liam J McCall’s speed and redundancy are comparable to its predecessors in the 205-foot Express Plus class. Passenger comfort represents the major difference: The extension of the superstructure out to the shear of the vessel increased the lounge capac-
ity. Originally intended to carry 126 passengers, *Liam J McCall* is now outfitted to seat 58 in first-class comfort.

The new approach to FSV seating, combined with the vessel’s speed and cargo capacity, was conceived as a means to compete with helicopter transport.

“Passenger seating is mounted on a rail system, allowing the cabin arrangement to be quickly customized to the unique requirements of the charterer,” said Robert Clemmons, executive vice president and chief operating officer for Seacor Marine Holdings Inc. “The seats are designed to maximize comfort so that the passengers arrive at their destination well rested. The seats feature an adjustable foot rest (and) adjustable recline, and are wider than the industry standard.”

The seating, supplied by Sterling’s Upholstery & Fabrication of New Iberia, La., includes seatback pockets, seat belts and beverage holders, features not usually associated with a crew boat.

“With galley stations, big-screen TVs, mood lighting and first-class seating, we want the passengers to have a comfortable and relaxing ride on every trip,” McCall said. •
Seawater likely entered El Faro from multiple locations, according to a report presented during the third and final round of Coast Guard Marine Board of Investigation hearings that also described a “plausible sequence” preceding the ship’s sinking.

Testimony offered during the hearings, held over two weeks in February in Jacksonville, Fla., also focused on cargo loading, ship stability and the third-party organization responsible for inspecting the roll-on/roll-off vessel.

TOTE Maritime, parent company of El Faro operator TOTE Services, pushed back against some testimony during the hearings, particularly the claims that some cargo likely shifted during the voyage.

El Faro sank on Oct. 1, 2015, roughly 35 miles east-northeast of Crooked Island in the Bahamas while sailing from Jacksonville to San Juan, Puerto Rico. The ship lost propulsion as Hurricane Joaquin approached and crew could not get it running again. Twenty-eight sailors and five Polish technicians died.

TOTE has settled lawsuits brought by 29 of the 33 people on board but declined to discuss terms. The company said it has cooperated with investigations by the Coast Guard and National Transportation Safety Board (NTSB).

“Our goal throughout the process has been to learn everything possible about the tragic loss of our crew and vessel,” TOTE spokesman Michael Hanson said. “We welcome any safety-related recommendation from these investigations that benefits all seafarers.”

Investigators from the Coast Guard and NTSB will use testimony from three rounds of Coast Guard hearings as well as information from the ship’s voyage data recorder (VDR). NTSB spokesman Peter Knudson said the agency...
hopes to release its findings later this year.

Whether the NTSB or Coast Guard will identify a probable cause remains to be seen. Based on what has been disclosed publicly, Capt. Larry Wade, the former captain on Maine Maritime Academy’s training ship **State of Maine**, doesn’t believe investigators have enough information to establish anything definitively.

“I think what they have to continue to do is run some simulations with all the data they have,” Wade said in a recent interview, suggesting that investigators could tailor the models to match the crew observations recorded on the VDR. “I think that is the closest they could come.”

The final round of Coast Guard hearings opened Feb. 6. Dr. Jeffrey Stettler of the Coast Guard Marine Safety Center presented a preliminary report that day on **El Faro**’s stability that offered a “plausible scenario” of what caused the ship to sink.

Stettler’s research suggests the following chain of events: The third cargo hold flooded, possibly through an open scuttle, contributing to the ship’s heavy starboard list in the storm’s strong winds. After losing propulsion and turning beam to the wind and waves, **El Faro** would have faced significant rolling.

“In this condition, eventually, (in) hold 2A and perhaps eventually hold 2 and hold 1, the ventilation supply exhaust openings would have immersed, allowing additional floodwater into hold 2A,” Stettler said during the hearings, noting crew conversations on the VDR transcript indicate that hold 2A’s bilge alarm sounded at 0716 on Oct. 1.

Downflooding could have filled cargo holds and the engine room with seawater, and the ship likely would have begun slowly roll-
ing over — a process potentially delayed when containers fell overboard. Stettler’s report concludes *El Faro* was vulnerable to “progressive flooding through cargo hold ventilation openings” and was “unlikely to survive even single-compartment flooding of hold 3 with combined 70- to 90-knot winds and 25- to 30-foot seas.”

Later in the hearings, an official with Harding Lifeboat Services — now a Palfinger subsidiary — said crew likely did not deploy the ship’s open lifeboats before it sank.

The Alternate Compliance Program used by the Coast Guard to inspect some vessels faced scrutiny during the proceedings. The classification society ABS was responsible for inspecting the 40-year-old *El Faro* in cooperation with the Coast Guard, which had placed the ship on a “targeting list” for ACP issues shortly before it sank.

Inspections of *El Faro*’s sister ship *El Yunque* after the disaster identified rust and steel wastage in ducts and vents not reported to the Coast Guard. TOTE has since scrapped *El Yunque*. An ABS attorney noted that inspectors found no major structural or mechanical problems on *El Faro*, and TOTE’s attorneys pointed out the Coast Guard considered the ship safe to sail.

The National Cargo Bureau reviewed cargo-loading practices aboard TOTE vessels on behalf of the NTSB. The bureau determined “securing may have been satisfactory for most of the cargo if lashings were properly applied, but was not likely to be satisfactory for heavier pieces stowed off-button.”

For instance, some lashings did not appear to be properly applied at all times, and some lashings were not always attached properly to “points of equivalent strength on the cargo,” the report said. One of the report’s authors said it was “probable” that cargo shifted during the voyage, potentially causing a “domino effect” in which other cargo broke free.

TOTE disputed some claims about deficient cargo loading below decks, and National Cargo Bureau experts acknowledged they do not investigate whether cargo loading complies with regulations. The NTSB said it would not comment on TOTE’s claims.

**Barges, towboat pinned in Ohio River lock allision**

Three barges carrying natural gas condensate broke free after hitting a wall in the Racine Lock and Dam north of Huntington, W.Va., resulting in two of the barges and their towboat being pinned.

The 3,200-hp towboat *Austin C. Settoon* was downbound on the Ohio River when the tow struck the wall near the lock entrance at mile marker 237.8, Coast Guard Petty Officer Lexie Preston said. The incident occurred at about 0530 on March 2.

Two barges and the towboat became pinned against gates on the dam, and one barge stayed within the lock. The towboat Capt. Ed Harris moved the barge from the lock late on March 2. Another towboat, *Alabama*, removed *Austin C. Settoon* from the dam on March 4, the Coast Guard said. M.K. McNally towed the remaining barges from the dam on March 5.

The Coast Guard established a unified command with the Army Corps of Engineers, West Virginia Department of Environmental Protection, Mason County Emergency Management and Settoon Towing of Pierre Part, La. Authorities closed the locks for about a day, which affected at least 13 upbound vessels and 11 downbound vessels.

The 297-foot barges were each carrying 30,000 barrels of natural gas condensate. The Coast Guard said there were no injuries or pollution from the accident, which remains under investigation.

Settoon Towing did not respond to a request for comment.

**Fire in English Channel damages US-flagged ro-ro**

Fire broke out in the lower levels of *M/V Honor* shortly after the U.S.-flagged cargo ship departed the Port of Southampton, England, on Feb. 24, according to operator American Roll-on Roll-off Carrier (ARC).

The 622-foot *Honor* was bound for Baltimore with a mixed load of vehicles and equipment when the ship’s fixed CO2 system went off. The fire damaged vehicles and other cargo on decks 1 through 3, ARC spokesman Charles Diorio said.

Crew sealed the holds and the fire was extinguished with the ship’s fixed CO2 system. *Honor* returned to Southampton under its own power; none of the 21 crewmembers were hurt.

The ship moved to an offshore anchorage to ventilate the holds before returning to the pier for inspection by the U.S. Coast Guard and National Transportation Safety Board. The cause of the fire is still under investigation.

The 297-foot *Honor* was damaged by a fire in the English Channel.
Ro-ro and break-bulk cargo when the fire occurred. As of early March, it was awaiting approval to sail from Southampton. The extent of the damage was not known.

ARC, based in Woodcliff Lake, N.J., is the largest U.S.-flagged ro-ro carrier and the third-largest U.S. international shipper.

Coast Guard boat strikes SC bridge, injuring six

Six Coast Guard crewmembers were injured when their vessel struck a bridge near Charleston, S.C., while responding to an apparent small aircraft accident.

The 45-foot response boat-medium hit rubber bumpers around the Paul Gelegotis Bridge at 2208 on Feb. 19. The vessel did not make contact with the support pillars, according to the Coast Guard.

It's not clear what part of the vessel hit the bumpers, and the Coast Guard said damage estimates were not available.

After the accident, crew steered the response boat to the St. Johns Yacht Harbor adjacent to the bridge, which carries traffic over the Stono River between Johns Island and James Island. The span is also known as the Stono River Bridge.

Paramedics transported the Coast Guard personnel to a hospital, where they were treated for minor injuries and released. The cause of the accident is under investigation.

Injury and search roundup
• The 35-year-old chief engineer aboard the Belgian-flagged tanker Ingrid suffered a broken leg after getting hit by the ship’s anchor chain in the lightering zone between Freeport and Galveston, Texas. Crew on the 1,092-foot ship reported the accident at about 0635 on March 2, and the Coast Guard airlifted the crewman to a nearby hospital later that morning.
• A 35-year-old Chinese mariner was reported missing from the Hong Kong-flagged bulker BBG Bright at about 0745 on March 2. The Coast Guard and local authorities used aircraft and boats to search for the man in the Mississippi River near Convent, La. The search was called off at sundown.
• The Coast Guard rescued a 34-year-old crewman Jan. 22 after he suffered head and shoulder injuries in a fall while working on the 528-foot Panama-flagged tanker Huemul. The man was airlifted into a helicopter roughly 145 miles southwest of Key West, Fla., and flown to waiting paramedics on shore.

Casey Conley
www.professionalmariner.com 29
The relief captain aboard Ricky J Leboeuf took the controls from the steersman as the towboat approached a San Jacinto River fleeting area. The river was fast and high, and he wanted to show the right way to downstream into a barge.

The vessel didn’t land flush against the barge, and the fast-moving current spun it sideways against the fleet. Water rushed into the towboat and it sank about two minutes after impact. Four crew escaped but a deck hand died. The victim was identified as Joshua S. Brazeal, 33, of Brookwood, Ala.

The incident occurred at 0752 on April 19, 2016, near Channelview, Texas, while the San Jacinto River was at 15 feet — 5 feet above flood stage.

The National Transportation Safety Board (NTSB) determined the probable cause stemmed from “the relief captain’s ill-advised decision to perform a downstreaming maneuver in high-water conditions without implementing the operating company’s risk mitigation strategies or other safeguards.” Taira Lynn Marine Ltd. No. 7 owned the 1,800-hp Ricky J Leboeuf and D&S Marine Service of Gray, La., operated the twin-screw vessel.

D&S Marine staff found errors in an initial NTSB accident report released in late January and notified the investigator, company Vice President Julian Murphy said. The NTSB released a corrected report on Feb. 10. Murphy declined to comment on the corrected report, and an agency spokesman would not discuss what changed in the revised version.

More than 5 inches of rain fell in Greater Houston on the day before the accident, and the river current was running at 3.5 knots on the morning of the sinking. Weather conditions were warm and clear with light winds.

Pinned against a barge while downstreaming, Ricky J Leboeuf heeled to starboard, then flooded when water rapidly entered the towboat through two open doors on the main deck. The vessel is shown here in a file photo.
Barge fleet, then turned to port to begin the downstreaming maneuver. Ricky J Leboeuf was making about 1.6 knots with a heading of 212 degrees when its port push knee landed on the barge at about 0750, the NTSB report said.

The relief captain applied power from the twin Caterpillar D379 diesels and used rudders and flanking rudders, but couldn’t square off against the barge. The fast-moving current pushed against the towboat’s starboard side and it spun against the fleet. “At 0752, the force of the river current acting on the Ricky J Leboeuf’s starboard-side hull, combined with the force applied above the waterline on the vessel’s port side from its contact with the stationary barges, caused the vessel to heel to starboard,” the NTSB said. “Water then rapidly entered the vessel through two open doors on the main deck, flooding the hull.”

The senior tankerman jumped onto the barge fleet, and the captain, relief captain and senior tankerman/steersman sought refuge on the port bow gunwale. The towboats Mr. Farrel and Tommy E rescued those three crewmembers.

Brazeal clung to a push knee after the vessel capsized. He tried to swim toward the bow gunwale but did not make it. He was wearing a personal flotation device, although the vest was missing when authorities found his body later that morning.

Downstreaming is a common practice on inland waterways that can be risky during periods of high water or fast currents. The U.S. Coast Guard and American Waterways Operators released a report and accompanying video in 1997 addressing downstreaming dangers and best practices. The video recommends towboats line up with the current rather than the barge fleet in case the fleet is at an angle.

D&S Marine has policies in its safety management system about
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downstreaming. During certain conditions, captains need approval from a port captain before performing the maneuver. D&S also requires that watertight doors and hatches be shut before starting, among other rules.

Before the accident, Vessel Traffic Services Houston/Galveston issued a warning about the high-water conditions, and D&S Marine sent advisories to Ricky J Leboeuf and other vessels working in Greater Houston. The company advisory placed restrictions on downstreaming and required assist tugs when working in a fleeting area, the report said.

The deck hand clung to a push knee after the vessel capsized. He tried to swim toward the bow gunwale but did not make it.

The captain and relief captain aboard Ricky J Leboeuf received the notice and discussed its contents with the crew. They also addressed the risks of downstreaming in high-water conditions. Even so, the relief captain pursued the maneuver “without consulting the vessel’s captain or the company port captain as required by company policy,” the NTSB said.

The relief captain refused to be interviewed by Coast Guard and NTSB investigators, and the report does not explain his decision-making process before the accident.

Crews raised the 54-year-old towboat a week after the incident and moved it to a nearby shipyard. The vessel was written off with damage estimated at $900,000.

Casey Conley
The captain of a small tugboat died when his vessel sank in a log booming ground near Kelowna, British Columbia.

Ivor Lundin was the only person aboard the 15-foot, 120-hp Mowitch when it went down before 2100 on Jan. 30 in Okanagan Lake. The vessel was working just off the Tolko Industries lumber mill at the time and Lundin worked for the mill.

“The worker was operating a small tug called a boom boat when the boat suddenly sank. Workers at the mill conducted a search and were not able to locate the operator,” Scott McCloy, a spokesman for WorkSafeBC, said in an email.

Local and provincial authorities responded to the lumber mill that night. Lundin’s body was found inside the tug’s wheelhouse at about 0300 on Jan. 31 and recovered later that day.

The Transportation Safety Board of Canada (TSB), the Royal Canadian Mounted Police (RCMP) and WorkSafeBC are investigating the incident. The cause of the sinking has not been determined, and the TSB declined to comment on a possible cause.

In statements after the accident, Tolko said it was “extremely saddened” by Lundin’s death. The company offered support services to employees and pledged to cooperate with the investigation. A company spokesman did not respond to a request for comment.

The Tolko mill is located along the eastern shore of Okanagan Lake in Kelowna, a city of 120,000 people between Vancouver and Calgary, Alberta. The facility has a booming ground in waters just off the mill where logs are deposited from trucks and often bundled together. Very small tugboats known as boom boats move these logs around and push them toward machinery that lifts them from the water.

Lundin was operating in the booming ground on the night of the sinking. Mill employees noticed the single-screw tugboat was missing shortly after 2100 and they reported it to authorities soon afterward. Underwater cameras were used to locate the vessel, which sank stern-first about 50 yards from shore in 13 feet of water.

“The operator was subsequently found within the cabin of the sunken boat, deceased. The operator’s body was recovered by RCMP divers,” McCloy said.

Investigators from the TSB, WorkSafeBC and other agencies oversaw the salvage of the tugboat the day after the accident.

Zillur Rahman, a TSB investigator, said the agency examined the tugboat after it was raised and interviewed mill employees as part of its inquiry. He declined to discuss other specifics about the incident, citing the ongoing investigation.

A spokesman for the RCMP declined to comment on the agency’s response.

Lundin, 57, lived in Kelowna and worked at the Tolko mill for 24 years, where the company said he was well liked. His obituary described his generosity, “beautiful soul” and his love for the water. It also said he sponsored a needy child in another country.

Casey Conley
An oceangoing tugboat towing a cargo barge ran aground on a charted shoal near Ketchikan, Alaska, while traveling along the Inside Passage.

The tug *Samson Mariner* struck Rosa Reef roughly five miles north of Ketchikan at 1858 on Feb. 15. The impact punctured a forward fuel tank, allowing about 1,100 gallons of diesel to spill before divers patched the hole soon after the accident.

Walter Stilson, a port captain with vessel owner Samson Tug & Barge, said the tug’s abrupt stop after the grounding caused the 322-foot cargo barge *St. Elias* to run into its stern, pushing the tug farther onto the rocks.

“It was an unfortunate accident,” he said in a phone interview. “Nobody thinks it’s going to happen to them or wants it to happen to them.”

Stilson praised the Southeast Alaska Petroleum Response Organization (SEAPRO) and Alaska Commercial Divers for their rapid response, noting that the hull was patched within about 40 minutes of the grounding.

“It was one of the quickest responses I’ve ever seen,” he said.

The U.S. Coast Guard is investigating the cause of the grounding, cargo that included shipping containers and other goods.

The grounding punctured the tug’s No. 2 forward fuel tank. Its port-side propeller and rudder were pushed downward during the collision with the barge, which also damaged the tug’s towing pins and the stern rollers, Stilson said. The barge sustained damage to the bow rake above the waterline.

*Owner praises responders after tug grounds, spills fuel near Ketchikan*
Coast Guard crews from Station Ketchikan responded to the grounding and were later joined by a SEAPRO team and Alaska Commercial Divers. Amak Towing responded with several tugs, and its crewmembers assisted with the booming of the tug, Stilson said.

Dave Owings, general manager of the nonprofit SEAPRO, said his office was notified of the leak about an hour after it happened. Its team arrived on the oil spill response vessel Rudyerd Bay later that night, although by then Amak and Samson crews had deployed sorbent boom.

The team from Alaska Commercial Divers hammered wooden wedges into the 5-inch-long breach while the vessel was on the rocks to stanch the leak, said Greg Updike, who owns the company with his wife. The tug refloated with the tide overnight on Feb. 16 and moved to a mooring ground in nearby Ward Cove along with St. Elias. There, the dive team applied a more durable temporary seal and SEAPRO laid 1,000 feet of hard boom around both vessels.

Sheening was reported in waters around Ketchikan, and SEAPRO crews used sorbent pads and other methods to contain and recover the fuel. Owings said the pads remained in place for a week after the grounding. A small amount of fuel reached the shore.

The Coast Guard estimated about 1,100 gallons of diesel escaped the tug, which was carrying more than 30,000 gallons. St. Elias had 40,000 gallons of fuel on board, but none escaped from the barge.

Crews at Vigor’s Ketchikan shipyard provided temporary repairs for St. Elias’ bow rake and the Coast Guard cleared it to finish its delivery route before undergoing a permanent fix, Stilson said. The Coast Guard also allowed Samson Mariner to sail to Seattle with one engine while under escort.

Casey Conley
Icebreaker tows cargo ship to safety after fire off Newfoundland

A Canadian light icebreaker towed a cargo ship to safety after an engine room fire disabled it, leaving the vessel adrift in rough seas off Port aux Basques, Newfoundland.

The 475-foot *Thorco Crown* was en route from Argentia, Newfoundland, to Montreal when the fire started at 0555 on Feb. 7. The ship’s built-in fire suppression system put out the flames, but not before engine room components were damaged. The ship was carrying only ballast at the time.

The fire disabled the engine, leaving the vessel adrift in rough seas about 20 miles off the southwest coast of Newfoundland. Canadian authorities estimated winds reached 35 knots, with seas reaching more than 15 feet.

The Canadian Coast Guard ship *Sir William Alexander*, a light icebreaker and buoy tender, reached *Thorco Crown* about six hours after the fire as the ship drifted toward shore. A tugboat summoned to bring *Thorco Crown* into port struggled to secure a tow, and after three attempts the Coast Guard ship intervened.

“The captain and crew of *CCGS Sir William Alexander* connected a towline to M/V *Thorco Crown* and towed the vessel and its crew to safer waters,” Jody Thomas, Canadian Coast Guard commissioner, said in a prepared statement. “Early on Feb. 9, the private tug took over the tow and later secured the vessel alongside in Sydney, Nova Scotia.”

German shipper MC-Schifffahrt, which owns and operates *Thorco Crown*, said a fuel line parted while the ship sailed through seas reaching 18 feet.

“The vessel was rolling due to the extreme weather/sea conditions and some fuel oil, spraying out of a broken manometer line of the
booster unit, initiated a fire on top of the main engine,” the company said in a written statement. “The vessel’s engine room was evacuated (and) sealed, and the vessel’s CO2 system was activated. The fire was very soon extinguished.”

MC-Schiffahrt’s statement about the fire aligns with the Transportation Safety Board of Canada’s investigation into the incident. Pierre Murray, a manager with the TSB, said the fire likely began after fuel sprayed onto the engine.

Thirteen crewmembers were aboard *Thorco Crown* when the fire occurred. There were no injuries, and MC-Schiffahrt said the crew was never in danger. The 13-year-old ship is registered in Antigua and Barbuda.

The 5,000-hp z-drive tugboat *Svitzer Bedford* towed the ship to Sydney. The tug is operated by Svitzer Canada of Halifax, Nova Scotia. Svitzer referred questions about the incident to Ardent, which oversaw the recovery. An Ardent spokesman declined to comment, citing client confidentiality.

Engine components and wires that snake through the engine room to other parts of the ship were damaged during the fire, Murray said. The estimated cost of the repairs was not available.

“It is supposed to be 30 days to repair,” he said, adding that the work took place in Sydney. “Any fire in the engine room makes a big mess.”

*Casey Conley*
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The number of injuries and fatalities during lifeboat drills in recent years point to training and equipment shortcomings that have raised concerns across the maritime industry, undermining the confidence of seafarers whose lives and careers hang in the balance.

One of the most serious incidents occurred dockside in the Canary Islands in February 2013. Eight crew on the cruise ship Thomson Majesty were aboard a lifeboat as it was being lowered during a drill. Partway down, the forward wire parted and the aft hook then failed. The lifeboat fell approximately 65 feet to the water and overturned. Five crewmembers died.

Two other fatal drills occurred in 2016, in Bermuda on Norwegian Breakaway and in France aboard Harmony of the Seas. These incidents also involved vessels in the cruise industry, which has seen the majority of lifeboat drill casualties, but they have happened on cargo vessels and drill rigs as well.

Capt. Ed Nanartowich, with 34 years of experience at sea and currently the president of Mid-Atlantic Maritime Academy in Norfolk, Va., believes that one of the faults is inadequate inspection of the equipment. In the case of life-saving appliances (LSAs) on a gravity davit, the equipment is the lifeboat and all the gear involved in launch and recovery. He listed some of the items that need to be carefully checked and maintained — oil levels, slushed wire falls, greased sheaves, frapping lines, tricing pendants — and added, “They all need attention at their appropriate periodicity.”

As it turns out, the final investigation report of the Thomson Majesty tragedy by Transport Malta concluded that the wire rope had been inspected, as required, at the appropriate intervals by the vessel safety
One crewmember died and four others were seriously injured after a lifeboat detached from Harmony of the Seas and fell to the water during a drill in Marseilles, France, in September 2016. The ship is shown here in the Port of Rotterdam.

officer and an approved contractor. However, it also found that the wire rope was a lower grade than required and had inferior strength. The accident was the result of “a parted wire rope fall that was caused by severe internal corrosion at the break point.” Wire rope in LSAs is subjected to harsh conditions and needs ongoing inspection and analysis.

Nanartowich said fault sometimes lies with the infrequency of drills, stating that problems can occur if davit-launched lifeboat drills “are not exercised religiously by people who are competent at lowering the boats and then recovering them.” The more frequently crews drill, the greater the mental and muscle memory they acquire, which gives them confidence that they know proper and safe procedures.

The core mission of the cruise industry is customer service and happy guests, so crews might feel that their main job is to provide

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a good vacation at sea for passengers. But this could have ramifications for emergency drill safety. Eric Dawicki, president and CEO of Northeast Maritime Institute in Fairhaven, Mass., said crews must be prepared to be effective.

Lifeboat safety: The mariners’ view

In a study of the use of mandatory equipment aboard cargo ships, the London-based Seafarers International Research Centre found:

• 55 percent of mariners would prefer a davit-launched closed lifeboat in an emergency.
• 40 percent would prefer a freefall lifeboat.
• 5 percent would prefer a davit-launched open lifeboat.
• A small number said they would choose a life raft.

When asked if they were happier to take part in drills where they did not board lifeboats or if they preferred drills where they did, seafarers were evenly split.

Researchers identified “a considerable amount of fear” among seafarers related to both davit-launched and freefall lifeboats. With freefall lifeboats, seafarers were most frequently fearful of the impact associated with a launch, citing stories of mariners sustaining back and neck injuries in drills.

The study revealed that some captains avoided launching lifeboats due to concern for the safety of their crew, or for fear of being unable to retrieve a lifeboat undamaged — or at all — following a drill. In these cases, launches might be logged as having taken place when in fact a substitute drill may have occurred (a “table-top” exercise, for example).

Researchers also cited seafarers who refused to participate in drills because of safety concerns.

Although some drills involve both crew and passengers, Dawicki said crews need to have segregated drills “intended to provide a high level of training beyond the initial certification training.” He emphasized the importance of these drills occurring in an environment where crewmembers feel they have time to talk about how to properly use the equipment. If necessary, an arrangement for refresher training protocols should be in place as well.

Capt. Thomas E. Bliss, director at Northwest Maritime Academy in Gig Harbor, Wash., said he has not heard academy trainees report that a drill made them fearful or that their lives were in danger, a mindset enhanced by never rushing a training exercise. “Accidents happen (when) drills for an individual crewmember are too few and far between, and when there’s unfamiliarity with the equipment,” he said.
LSA equipment at this point should involve the next generation of release and retrieval hooks, Bliss said, with trainers understanding the errors most frequently occurring during drills. “You use it or lose it,” he said in regard to training. “If you don’t use a checklist, you start forgetting steps in the process of deploying or recovering a lifeboat.”

Drills that are rushed or incomplete point to a leadership problem. Senior and junior officers have a responsibility to ensure that enough time is devoted to what Dawicki calls a “safety culture.”

This culture can be compromised by communication difficulties on ships with multinational crews. This is particularly true in the cruise industry, which has ships with much larger crews than other commercial sectors. When Royal Caribbean introduced Harmony of the Seas in 2016, it had a crew of 2,100 representing 77 nationalities. Even if all of those crewmembers spoke reasonable English, the potential for misunderstanding — between crewmembers as well as between crewmembers and officers — was high.

“Communication should be key to any operation, including drills, but can be a weak link when a seafarer might smile, nod and say ‘yessir’ even though they don’t quite get what you said,” Nanartowich said.

Dawicki, a delegate at the International Maritime Organization since 1996, expressed concern about some flag states watering down safety-skill recertification under the Standards of Training, Certification and Watchkeeping for Seafarers (STCW).

“The purpose of STCW is to credential mariners for performance in the field,” he said. “In the original plan, there was to be a standard refresher program — repeating the entire course — once every five years. Mariners needed to demonstrate at those intervals that they were still capable of performing all the safety skills.”

The problem, Dawicki said, is that some registries may be accepting recertification programs whittled down to 16 or even eight hours of that original full-week course.

The loss of 123 crew from the offshore oil rig Alexander L. Kielland in the North Sea in 1980 led to improvements in the LSA hook mechanisms on oil rigs and then on merchant ships. As tragedy prompted remediation in that incident, there is hope among some in the industry that the recent spate of incidents will lead to improvements in lifeboat drills and systems. Others are more skeptical, including Mark Dickinson, general secretary of Nautilus International, a London-based maritime trade union and professional organization.

“It is appalling that the industry seems incapable (of) solving this problem,” Dickinson said in September after the Harmony of the Seas incident. “It is high time that we had some radical thinking about the whole concept of lifeboats and examine the potential of alternative evacuation systems.”

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De-mystifying the targeting process for Port State Control exams

The U.S. Coast Guard’s Port State Control (PSC) program is intended to ensure that foreign-flagged vessels operating in U.S. waters comply with applicable international conventions and U.S. regulations, with the ultimate goal of identifying and eliminating substandard ships from U.S. waters. To promote efficiency and minimize the unnecessary expenditure of time, energy and, yes, money by both the Coast Guard and the regulated industry, the Coast Guard utilizes risk-assessment matrices and other criteria to prioritize the vessels it targets for PSC exams. As these exams can result in costly and disruptive control measures for non-compliant vessels, up to and including expulsion from port or an International Maritime Organization (IMO) detention, shipowners, operators, managers and charterers would be well served to understand the Coast Guard’s process for determining which vessels it targets for PSC exams.

The principal tools the Coast Guard utilizes to determine which vessels to target for PSC exams are risk-assessment matrices — one focused on safety and environmental protection, and the other on vessel security.

In the first matrix, the Coast Guard looks at safety- or environmental-related factors in five categories and assigns points based on how the vessel “performs” in each category. The five categories are the vessel’s management (owner, operator, et al.), the performance of the vessel’s flag state, the performance of the vessel’s recognized organization (i.e., classification society), the vessel’s compliance history and the vessel’s inherent characteristics (age, type, etc.).

The worse a vessel scores in each category, the more points it is assigned. The more points a vessel accumulates, the more likely it is to be targeted for a safety and environmental compliance PSC exam. For example, a vessel that scores 17 or more points through application of the matrix is designated as Priority I; for such a vessel, port entry may be restricted until the Coast Guard examines the vessel. A vessel that scores between 7 and 16 points is considered a Priority II vessel; for it, cargo operations or passenger embarkation/debarkation typically will be restricted if the sector commander/captain of the port (COTP) determines that the vessel poses a safety or environmental risk to the port. Vessels assigned less than 7 points through utilization of the matrix are considered non-priority.

Chief Petty Officer Mark Henricksen and Petty Officer 3rd Class Danielle Montez conduct a safety examination aboard the Liberian-flagged containership MSC Vaishnavi on Feb. 6 in Boston. Risk assessment matrices play a principal role in determining which ships to select for PSC exams.
vessels, since they pose a low safety and environmental risk to the port.

This matrix, though an important and useful tool, is not the sole means of determining whether a vessel will be targeted for a safety and environmental compliance PSC exam. Vessels involved in a marine casualty that may have affected seaworthiness, a vessel that a Coast Guard COTP determines poses a potential hazard to the port or the environment, or vessels whose classification society has a detention ratio equal to or greater than 2 percent are all considered Priority I vessels, regardless of their matrix score. Ships with outstanding requirements from a previous examination in any U.S. port that require clearing are considered Priority II vessels, as are vessels that have not been examined within the past 12 months. Finally, any vessel may be randomly selected for a safety and environmental compliance PSC exam regardless of its compliance history or performance.

The second matrix the Coast Guard uses is for determining which vessels to target for security PSC exams. Four security-related categories of information — ship management, flag state, recognized security organization performance and the vessel’s security compliance history — are examined to guide the Coast Guard in deciding whether to do a security PSC exam. Previously, the Coast Guard also considered a vessel’s port-of-call history, but that category will no longer be part of the decision-making process in the vessel security matrix. This change will be reflected in the
As with the safety and environmental compliance matrix, poorer vessel performance in the categories of interest will increase the likelihood of a vessel being targeted for a security PSC exam. Vessels scoring 17 points or higher will be considered Priority I International Ship and Port Facility Security (ISPS) vessels, and will be examined at sea prior to entering port. Vessels scoring 7 to 16 points are considered ISPS II vessels and will be examined in port. Vessels scoring below 7 points are considered ISPS III vessels and will not receive a security exam, unless randomly selected to do so.

As with the safety and environmental compliance process, the matrix score is not the sole means of determining a vessel’s priority status, and thus its susceptibility to receive a security exam. A vessel will be designated ISPS I if its recognized security organization has had three or more major control actions in the past 12 months, or if the vessel has had an ISPS-related denial of entry or expulsion from port in the past 12 months. A vessel will be designated ISPS II if it has had a new owner or flag state since its last exam, or if it has not had an ISPS compliance exam within the past 12 months (assuming the vessel is not designated ISPS I through application of the matrix or for one of the other reasons discussed above).

PSC exams, and the negative consequences that can result, can be very costly and disruptive to shipowners and operators. Administrative consequences include denial of entry or expulsion, detention, COTP orders, customs hold, restrictions of operations or vessel movement, delay, a comprehensive security inspection, a letter of deviation, flag-state notification, and lesser administrative/corrective measures. The vessel’s owners or operators may be subject to significant fines for violations of applicable safety, environmental or security regulations. Criminal prosecutions, which can result in crippling fines, onerous environmental monitoring programs and other devastating consequences to shipowners and operators, are increasingly being seen, particularly in cases involving fraud and deceit during the course of a PSC exam.

Shipowners and operators can engage in extensive self-help measures to minimize the cost, inconvenience and collateral consequences of a PSC exam. These include the following:

- Ensuring that internal processes are in place aboard their vessels to promote compliance with applicable international safety, environmental protection and security standards.
- Carefully selecting entities associated with the vessel — the flag state, classification society and recognized security organization. A poor choice in any of these realms can lead to an increased likelihood of receiving a PSC exam, with all of the negative consequences that could stem from it.
- Investing in preventive external compliance audits that can result in the identification of issues upfront, allowing them to be rectified before they are discovered in a PSC exam.
- Retaining the services of compliance specialists if faced with the negative consequences of a PSC exam or any other PSC action. The specialists can work to reduce the severity of the imposed control action.
- Accessing the Coast Guard’s PSC website, www.uscg.mil/hq/cgcvc/cvc2/psc/, which contains some extraordinarily useful information on the topic of Port State Control exams. Particularly useful are the PSC annual reports, which contain the matrices referred to in this article. These reports provide statistics that, among other things, permit shipowners and operators to evaluate the performance of external entities (flag states, classification societies and recognized security organizations) that they may be considering to associate with their vessels.

Andrew J. Norris, a retired U.S. Coast Guard captain, is an attorney currently working as a senior regulatory compliance consultant at Independent Maritime Consulting LLC. He can be reached at anorris@independentmaritime.com or by calling (401) 871-7482.
“Kelly, you need to do what I did — hire a license consultant.” He continued, “The one I used for my recent upgrade is a retired Coast Guard REC evaluator. She made sure that I got all the endorsements and certifications I was entitled to, and the whole process took just a few weeks, much faster than I expected — and her fee was only 200 bucks.”

The Coast Guard recognizes the value of using a license consultant. The latest version of CG-719B even has a section on page 5 where you can formally designate a “third party” of your choice to look out for your interests, someone you authorize to contact/be contacted on your behalf by the evaluators at the NMC. There are a number of license consultants located throughout the United States. Professional training schools and/or your local Coast Guard REC should be able to give you the names of the ones in your area. Based on my engineer friend William’s recommendation, the next day I called the license consultant whom he had used.

After I filled out the CG-719B application for my MMC renewal, including all relevant documentation, I sent the whole package of about 20 pages to the license consultant, along with a check covering all USCG credential charges plus her fee. She reviewed my paperwork to make sure that it was properly filled out, verified my supporting documentation and personally submitted it to the Puget Sound Regional Exam Center, where they pre-screened the paperwork and then sent it on. As my MMC renewal made its way through the review process at the NMC, the consultant monitored its progress and kept in contact with the evaluator in West Virginia. A few weeks later I got my new credential back, done correctly and with all the endorsements for which I applied. The license consultant I retained for my MMC renewal in 2010 retired, so I used another top-notch professional who lives in Michigan for my latest MMC renewal a few months ago. He did a great job, too.

For decades, merchant mariners enjoyed being able to obtain/upgrade/renew their documents in person at one of the local Coast Guard offices. When the USCG made the decision to use the NMC for issuing credentials and not the examination centers, to a large extent it shut mariners out of the process. The total lack of personal, face-to-face contact when dealing with the NMC is why, in my opinion, it’s more important than ever to have a license consultant in your corner. Considering the potential for lost jobs or even a lost career resulting from a mistake or omission at the NMC, and especially with all the new requirements, hiring a maritime license consultant is the only way to go.

Till next time, I wish you all smooth sailin’.

Kelly Sweeney holds the licenses of master (oceans, any gross tons) and master of towing vessels (oceans), and regularly sails on a wide variety of commercial vessels. He lives on an island near Seattle. You can contact him at captsweeney@professionalmariner.com.
It was a few minutes before they opened the doors of the U.S. Coast Guard Regional Exam Center (REC) at Seattle’s Pier 36, and I waited anxiously. I was a cadet on Sea Land Galveston, a containership running between various Alaskan ports and Seattle’s Terminal Five, scheduled to depart for sea at 1700 that afternoon. That meant there were only a few short hours for me to get a replacement merchant mariner’s document, my original having been lost the day before when my wallet was stolen. If unsuccessful, I would not be allowed to make the voyage — resulting in a failing grade on my sea project and jeopardizing my impending graduation from the California Maritime Academy in a few months. The pressure was on.

The doors opened and I pushed my way to the front of the line, getting signed in first. When my name was called, I told the story of my lost z-card. Listening intently, the lady behind the counter handed me a form and said, “Fill out this application now, then go down on 1st Avenue and get two passport photos at one of the photographers, then come back with them and we’ll get you your replacement — and, with any luck, have you out of here by lunchtime.” I did what she asked, running all the way over and back to a passport photo shop a few blocks south of Pike Place Market. Racing in with the photos, I handed them over and then waited nervously on one of the big wooden benches for my name to be called once more. A few minutes before the Coast Guard office closed for lunch, my new duplicate z-card was ready. After thanking the people who helped me, I went outside to catch a cab. On the ride back to Terminal Five I breathed a huge sigh of relief, knowing that my sea project — and upcoming graduation — were safe.

For close to 25 years, the Coast Guard’s 17 RECs were the mainstays of the merchant mariner documentation system. Located in major port areas and easily accessed by mariners, the RECs had the personal touch, allowing mariners to meet face to face with their evaluators and get direct in-person answers regarding their document upgrade or renewal. Then, from 2005 until 2009, the Coast Guard shifted away from the REC system, instead consolidating the evaluation, review and issuance of merchant mariner documentation at the new National Maritime Center (NMC) located in Martinsburg, W.Va. Once the NMC began issuing credentials, the fast turnarounds that used to be possible at the RECs were a thing of the past.

After the NMC took over nearly all the responsibilities for merchant mariner credentialing, I began to hear stories. Many mariners were exasperated by trying to deal with an evaluator located thousands of miles away who they couldn’t speak with face to face. Dale, a 1,600-ton master, told me how his first Merchant Mariner Credential (MMC) renewal after the NMC took over dragged on for over eight months. The process was plagued by a lack of communication and misunderstandings that cost him jobs and drained his bank account.

As my MMC renewal approached in 2010, I became concerned about getting caught up in the maelstrom of the new NMC-centric credentialing process. Telling my concerns to William, an engine officer and friend of mine, he replied,
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