

Cantwell's Coast Guard Authorization Bill, Including Oil Spill Prevention Measures, Passes Senate

Local News

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WASHINGTON, DC – The Senate on Friday unanimously passed legislation crafted by Senator Maria Cantwell (D-WA) to authorize programs and funding for the U.S. Coast Guard, including provisions she authored to strengthen protections against oil spills. The voice vote marks a bipartisan legislative milestone and the breaking of a logjam that had blocked passage of a Coast Guard Authorization Bill for the past four years. Cantwell, Chair of the Senate Commerce Subcommittee on Oceans, Atmosphere, Fisheries and Coast Guard, also included key language that saves taxpayers dollars by overhauling a failed Coast Guard acquisitions program.

The bill, which now goes to a House-Senate conference committee, improves oil spill prevention and response and implements long-sought environmental safeguards to protect America's waterways from contamination. Cantwell authored language that will enhance spill prevention efforts on vessels transporting oil, further reduce traffic in the Olympic Coast National Marine Sanctuary and establish a stronger role for tribes. The Coast Guard Authorization Bill authorizes the Coast Guard's funding levels for fiscal years 2010 and 2011 and includes new authority for the Coast Guard to work with international maritime authorities and organizations.

"The ongoing oil spill in the Gulf of Mexico underscores the urgency of passing this bill because we depend on the Coast Guard to protect our maritime workers and coastlines from these disasters," Cantwell said. "While the Deepwater Horizon disaster reminds us all of the risk of operating off-shore oil rigs and the irreparable damage that can occur, we must continue to be vigilant in preventing spills that can occur during the transportation of oil through our nation's waterways and coastal areas on barges. This bill provides much-needed tools to the Coast Guard, supporting its diverse missions from responding to the earthquake in Haiti to fighting to contain the Deepwater Horizon spill."

Approximately 600 oil tankers and 3,000 oil barges travel through Puget Sound's fragile ecosystem annually, carrying about 15 billion gallons of oil to Washington's five refineries. But current rules requiring industry to position additional oil spill response equipment exclude much of the Strait of Juan de Fuca, leaving that busy shipping lane unprotected. The Senate-passed legislation extends the "high volume port area" designation west to Cape Flattery, expanding federal oil spill response requirements throughout the entire length of the Strait of Juan de Fuca.

The bill requires the Coast Guard to pursue enforcement of international oil pollution agreements

covering the high seas, reducing the threat of oil spills in international waters. It also requires the Guard to address the risk of spills resulting from oil transfer operations, address the risk of spills from human error and establish a grant program to reduce smaller spills on recreational boats or fishing vessels.

This bill also includes provisions based on Cantwell's Deepwater reform legislation — passed during the last Congress but not enacted into law — to make fundamental changes to the Coast Guard's acquisition program to safeguard taxpayer dollars. It requires the Coast Guard to ban the use of private contractors to manage its acquisitions. Deepwater — a partnership between the Coast Guard and a joint venture by Lockheed Martin and Northrop Grumman, known as Integrated Coast Guard Systems (ICGS) — is a 25-year, \$24 billion initiative to replace the aging fleet of Coast Guard assets used in missions more than 50 miles from the coast. It is the largest procurement effort in the Coast Guard's history. Senator Cantwell chaired a hearing in 2007 that exposed glaring problems with the program, including cost overruns, serious design flaws, ships and technology that failed to meet basic contract requirements, and a contract structure that took oversight power away from the Coast Guard and gave primary decision-making authority to ICGS.

"The Coast Guard's Deepwater initiative has wasted millions in taxpayer dollars and has not delivered the equipment the Guard so urgently needs," Senator Maria Cantwell said. "We've seen what happens when industry is given too much authority over a government acquisition with little incentive to control costs. Today we have taken a major step toward securing a strong Coast Guard for the future and ending the waste of taxpayer dollars." Some of the bill's other provisions include:

New Coast Guard Authorities: Given the large amount of international work done by the Coast Guard, the Coast Guard Authorization bill provides the Coast Guard greater authority to support and work with international maritime authorities and organizations. This will help the Coast Guard get better access to global safety and security information on foreign vessels. It will also allow the Coast Guard to work more cooperatively with other nations on law enforcement and maritime safety.

Coast Guard Organization: The bill allows the Coast Guard to rework its command structure and increase its alignment with other armed forces. This altered command structure is a next step in the Coast Guard's ongoing reorganization and modernization based on the lessons learned from Hurricane Katrina and other recent disasters.

Coast Guard Personnel: This bill makes several changes to better-support the men and women who serve their country in the U.S. Coast Guard. It gives greater flexibility for service-members to retain leave in cases of major disasters and other emergencies, provides legal assistance for

service-members, allows greater reimbursement for medical-related expenses, and allows Coast Guard service-members to participate in the Armed Forces Retirement Home system.

Polar Icebreakers: An icebreaker provision in the bill directs the Coast Guard to conduct a thorough cost-benefit analysis of recapitalizing the Coast Guard's polar icebreaker fleet. The analysis will consider the costs and benefits of building new vessels versus rebuilding the existing vessels.