Proposed Bill Would Improve Ability to Remove Derelict Sea Vessels

Local News

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OLYMPIA — Commissioner of Public Lands Peter Goldmark, Senator Phil Rockefeller (D-23 rd), and Representative Joe Fitzgibbon (D-34th), today announced agency-requested legislation aimed at cleaning up derelict and abandoned boats and other vessels from Washington State ’s waters. Changes to the Derelict Vessel Removal Program would hold vessel owners more accountable and provide local governments with the same liability immunity that emergency responders have. “Although this program is carried out state-wide, it is of particular importance to the efforts to clean up Puget Sound and support restoration of the Sound,” said Commissioner of Public Lands Peter Goldmark. “Thanks to the leadership of Senator Rockefeller and Representative Fitzgibbon, DNR will be able to work with local communities to get rid of derelict vessels.”

SB 5271 is being sponsored by Senator Phil Rockefeller and companion HB 1322 by Representative Joe Fitzgibbon. The legislation is an important element of DNR’s *Strategic Plan: 2010-2014, the Goldmark Agenda*. The bill is a direct result of working with local governments, ports, communities and marina owners to refine the already effective program. “Improving existing programs which prevent and manage derelict vessels will help clean up the Puget Sound,” said Rockefeller. “The budget crisis encourages us to get more creative in our clean-up efforts, and fine-tuning existing efforts is a great place to start.” “Abandoned boats are a big problem, logistically and environmentally, for communities and waterways around the state,” said Representative Joe Fitzgibbon. “This program is tackling that problem effectively, but the Legislature can improve it by holding owners more accountable and improving DNR’s partnerships with local governments. This solution is free to taxpayers and helps DNR use its existing resources better to improve waterway safety and eliminate serious pollution hazards.” **A more effective program—at no additional cost** Through deliberate action or negligence, vessels can break up, sink, or block navigational channels. Such circumstances warrant immediate response to prevent injury and leaks of toxic materials that cause serious environmental damage. The bill would amend the Derelict Vessel Removal Program to: § Allow misdemeanor charges in cases where an owner knowingly allows his/her vessel to sink, break up, block navigational channels or contaminate the environment. § Provide liability immunity to public entities acting in good faith under the provisions of the Derelict Vessel Act, making it easier for municipalities to participate in the program. Authorized public entities are not protected from lawsuits like other emergency responders.