

Begich, Cantwell Welcome Return of Icebreaker Polar Star to Service

Local News

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WASHINGTON, D.C. — U.S. Senators Mark Begich and Maria Cantwell today welcomed the announcement that the icebreaker Polar Star is ready again for operational deployment after spending years in Seattle in “caretaker” status. Last Friday, the Coast Guard announced the 399-foot, 75,000 horsepower heavy icebreaker was again “ready for sea.” **“As chairman of the Senate Oceans Subcommittee, I have made this issue a top priority. After relying on just one operational icebreaker for years, having the Polar Star back up and running is great news,”** Sen. Begich said. **“But with increased the marine traffic through the Arctic and energy exploration underway in the Beaufort and Chukchi Seas, there is no question we need more icebreakers to protect our nation’s economic and national security interests. I look forward to continuing to work with Sen. Cantwell so we can get the commitment to build a new class of heavy icebreakers to meet our nation’s needs while keeping options open for our two remaining Polar-class icebreakers.”**

“Icebreakers are critical to our national security and America’s interest in the Arctic,” Cantwell said. **“Today, after an overhaul by Vigor Shipyards in Seattle, the Polar Star is ready to return to sea — where it belongs. This is good news for the Northwest economy, as the Arctic becomes an increasingly important route for trade and commerce. And, refurbishing large icebreakers means hundreds of jobs for Washington state shipbuilders. This is a key first step, but we have a long way to go to meet America’s icebreaking needs. I’ll continue to work in the Senate to support more icebreakers and maritime jobs.”** Begich and Cantwell have been vocal about the need for multiple icebreakers to increase the nation’s ability to maintain a presence in the fast-changing Arctic. America’s only other icebreaker, the Healy, was designed as a scientific research vessel and only has medium icebreaking capability. The need for icebreaking capacity was highlighted last year by the Healy’s assistance in refueling the ice-bound city of Nome during the dead of winter. Language inserted by the two senators into the Coast Guard Authorization Act of 2012 prevents the decommissioning and scrapping of the Polar Star’s currently inactive sister ship Polar Sea until a business case analysis is completed. The analysis evaluates the reactivation and extension of service life through 2022. The need to maintain icebreaking capabilities and to fulfill the Coast Guard’s icebreaking needs was identified in the 2010 High Latitude Study.