



2007 Position Papers

ENSURING THE U.S. COAST GUARD FLEET CAN MEET THE NEEDS OF GREAT LAKES COMMERCE



Assignment of another 140-foot-long icebreaking tug, such as the one pictured above, to the Great Lakes will ensure the U.S. Coast Guard can perform its icebreaking mission. Photo courtesy Boatnerd.com.



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The 17.7 million tons of cargo the U.S.-Flag Great Lakes fleet moved during periods of ice cover in 2006 represented 16 percent of its annual total. These raw materials sustained industrial production and power generation during winter, and could be shipped because the U.S. Coast Guard had resources assigned to the Great Lakes. However, if an additional 140-foot-long icebreaking tug is not stationed on the Great Lakes, shipping during the ice season will be jeopardized.

The Great Lakes shipping season for dry-bulk cargos generally begins in early March and extends until the end of January. Ice begins to form on the Great Lakes in mid-December and often does not weaken until well into April.¹ At the height of winter, the ice often is 3 to 4 feet thick, especially on Lake Superior. Windrows (slabs of broken ice piled atop one another by the wind) can be 10 to 15 feet thick. This harsh environment demands the removal of floating navigational aids.

The amount of cargo that moves while the Lakes are iced over is significant. In 2006, U.S.-Flag Great Lakes fleets carried 17.7 million tons of dry-bulk cargo during periods of ice cover. Those cargos represented 16 percent of the fleet's annual total, and were crucial to sustaining industrial production and power generation during the winter.

The reason cargo must move during the ice season is simple: American industries must keep stockpiling costs to the bare minimum if they are to compete in an increasingly global economy.

There are more than 100 deep-draft ports and three major connecting channels that handle cargo during the ice season. To facilitate shipping after ice forms, a number of the newer U.S.-Flag Lakers have ice-strengthened bows. However, commercial navigation cannot reliably meet the needs of commerce unless the United States Coast Guard keeps the shipping lanes open.² The current complement of U.S. Coast Guard assets is aging.

Lake Carriers' Association is very concerned about the Coast Guard's ability to perform its icebreaking, aids to navigation, search and rescue, and border security missions on the Great Lakes. The Coast Guard must cover more than 1,500 miles of international border in addition to 6,700 miles of U.S. coastline on the Great Lakes.

Adding to the problem is the fact the Canadian Coast Guard recently decommissioned one of its icebreakers with no replacement planned. The United States and Canada have a long history of assisting each other with icebreaking on the Great Lakes, but now the U.S. Coast Guard will have to assume an even larger role. An additional 140-foot-long icebreaking tug must be assigned to the Great Lakes. The risks are too great. The Great Lakes basin remains the foundation of the nation's industrial might, the steel industry in particular. However, every industry in the region relies on raw materials shipped on the Great Lakes during periods of ice cover. If the Coast Guard does not reassign a 140-foot-long icebreaking tug to the Great Lakes, industries that drive the nation's economy and defense capabilities could find themselves short of the raw materials they need to keep America strong and safe.

¹ During the particularly brutal winter of 1993-1994, the U.S. Coast Guard conducted icebreaking missions until May 18!

² The Coast Guard has been charged with icebreaking to meet the needs of commerce nationwide by order of the President since 1936.