



**TESTIMONY OF
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ON

**“THE IMPORTANCE OF GREAT LAKES ICEBREAKING
TO THE REGIONAL ECONOMY”**

**BEFORE THE
SENATE COMMITTEE ON COMMERCE, SCIENCE, AND TRANSPORTATION
SUBCOMMITTEE ON OCEANS, FISHERIES
CLIMATE CHANGE, AND MANUFACTURING**

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Introduction

Chair Baldwin, Ranking Member Sullivan, and distinguished Members of the Subcommittee, thank you for inviting me to testify and for your continuing support of the United States Coast Guard. As a premier, multi-mission, maritime service responsible for the safety, security and stewardship of the Nation’s waters, the Coast Guard offers a unique and enduring value to the American public. At all times a military service and branch of the U.S. Armed Forces, a federal law enforcement agency, a first responder, and a regulatory body, the Coast Guard serves on the front lines for a Nation whose economic prosperity and national security are inextricably linked to our waterways, including the Great Lakes.

The Great Lakes region is vital to North American industry, which generates an estimated \$6 trillion in gross domestic product annually. The waterways which support this industry are environmentally dynamic and seasonal in nature, demanding a ready workforce and fleet. Today, Coast Guard icebreaking operations, international partnerships, and efforts to recapitalize our domestic icebreaking fleet are vital for the Service to sustain readiness, resilience, and capability for missions throughout this region.

There are 40 million people, including members of our Coast Guard workforce, who call the Great Lakes basin home. For over 88 years, the Coast Guard has safeguarded the waters of the Great Lakes marine transportation system (MTS). We proudly serve and protect this region and these communities. In the winter, your Coast Guard breaks the path for prosperity.

At the forefront of Coast Guard Great Lakes icebreaking operations is our workforce. I am incredibly proud of our Coast Guard Active Duty, Reserve, Civilian, and Auxiliary members who perform operations across the Great Lakes and my top priority is to transform the Service to best support them. I look forward to discussing the quality-of-life of Coast Guard Service members and their families serving in locations across the region, including here in Wisconsin.

Mission Critical: Supporting the Workforce

Since I last appeared before Members of this Committee and responded to questions about the handling of investigations of prior sexual misconduct at the Coast Guard Academy, the Service has focused on prevention of sexual harassment and sexual assault; holding members accountable who do not live up to our standards; listening to and supporting victims and survivors; and, strengthening the Service's culture and commitment to our core values of Honor, Respect, and Devotion to Duty. From Senior Leaders to the most junior recruit, everyone in our Service must be committed to fostering a culture where each member of our workforce is valued, empowered, trusted, and supported. To my Service, to Congress, to the American public—we continue our important work on this issue. We are unconditionally committed.

My highest priority is the Coast Guard workforce. Without these Sentinels, we cannot operate or maintain our icebreakers, cutters, boats, and aircraft. Thanks to the tremendous support of Congress, we have made meaningful investments to improve the work and life of individuals and families serving across the country. I remain committed in providing the innovative tools, inclusive policies, and quality-of-life support to meet the demands of today and tomorrow. We will continue to use all resources necessary to revolutionize talent management policies and deliver point-of-need healthcare and family services.

We must press forward and continue to develop new strategies for the quality-of-life issues that challenge our workforce and their families. These challenges can be exacerbated in some locations, including idyllic, close-knit communities across this region where the Coast Guard serves. In these locations we are dependent on private sector resources to provide health care services for our workforce. Improved access across the health system must include expanding the use of telehealth services, online appointment scheduling, electronic health records, and bolstering health services such as dental care, physical therapy, and behavioral health services.

We are prioritizing family support, focused on increasing access to childcare, expanding professional development opportunities, and assisting spouses desiring to participate in fellowships with civilian employers. We offer expanded Work-Life services to families through our global network of ombudsmen—who serve as the critical communications link between commands and families. This support allows the Coast Guard's active duty workforce to overcome the challenge of balancing military service and their family life. I want to emphasize my commitment to the entirety of 'Team Coast Guard.' Our families are essential to mission success—success which is critical to safeguarding the waterways of the Great Lakes.

Advancing the Mission, Sharpening Our Standards

The foundation of commerce in the Great Lakes is the movement of quantities of commodities and agricultural goods such as iron, coal, petroleum products, and salt. Since the most cost-effective mode of transportation for these raw materials is by vessel, the continuous and unimpeded flow of these resources upon the navigable waters of the MTS is essential to preserve the region's—and Nation's—economic and national prosperity. The seasonality of the Great Lakes, including its propensity to experience ice-choked conditions, can challenge this nationally significant supply chain.

The Service conducts domestic icebreaking operations throughout the Great Lakes to facilitate this critical maritime commerce. Our domestic icebreaking operations generally fall into one of four priorities: search and rescue, urgent response to vessels, exigent community services, and facilitation of navigation.

Conducting search and rescue and urgent response to vessels is at the core of the Service, and our icebreaker fleet ensures we continue to help those in peril through the winter ice season. We provide icebreaking services to open channels for ferry routes and ice-bound Michigan communities such as Mackinac Island, Beaver Island, Sugar Island, Harsens Island, and Washington Island to ensure these communities can receive food, heating oil, fuel, and medical assistance. We also work with the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers to aid in the prevention of floods and hazardous water levels near shoreline communities that may be caused by ice obstructions, such as flooding events in recent years near the St. Clair River.

As originally established by President Roosevelt’s Executive Order 7521 in 1936, and further codified by the Don Young Coast Guard Authorization Act of 2022 (CGAA), the Coast Guard facilitates navigation by breaking ice to meet the needs of commerce. Icebreaking operations include the establishment and maintenance of tracks in the connecting waterways of the MTS, as well as providing escorts and direct assistance to vessels beset in ice or requiring aid.

The Coast Guard monitors the amount of time the highest priority waterways are available for vessel passage during the winter. Our goal is to keep these waterways open 95 percent of the season and we generally achieve this in all but the harshest conditions. As both economic demands and climate conditions change, we look to evolve this mission.

The Coast Guard is evaluating current data sources to develop a broader slate of performance measures. Proposed measures will expand beyond the current target (i.e., keeping the highest priority waterways open 95 percent of the ice season) to encompass the health of the waterway, impacts of commercial icebreaking partners, and performance of the icebreaking fleet.

In addition, a public-facing database will be established to share data about this mission. While the most recent and current ice seasons have not afforded many opportunities to collect mission data, we are working with Great Lakes shipping partners to continue these efforts. We have already established preliminary weekly reporting on commercial vessel delays caused by inadequate icebreaking on our public-facing *Homeport* website.

The Power of Partnerships

Establishing and sustaining partnerships is key to success for the Coast Guard’s domestic icebreaking mission. The Great Lakes and St. Lawrence Seaway form a continuous navigable waterway bordering the United States and Canada, spanning more than 2,300 miles from the western end of Lake Superior to the Atlantic Ocean. Recognizing the Great Lakes is a shared waterway, the Coast Guard partners closely with the Canadian Coast Guard to optimize efficiencies across the fleet of icebreaking assets in the Great Lakes. Since 1980, the two Coast Guards have maintained an agreement—known as *One Fleet*—which allows both United States and Canadian Coast Guard icebreakers to operate interchangeably on both sides of the international border.

This shared system of waterways is vital to the prosperity of both nations. During an average 145-day ice season, the icebreakers of the United States and Canada facilitate about 1,000 vessel transits, carrying 20 million tons of bulk cargo annually and supporting \$1 billion in industrial production. The Coast Guard also relies upon the Great Lakes' numerous commercial icebreaking companies to conduct icebreaking within internal waterways and alongside private docks and harbors. These services free our more-capable icebreakers to focus on major waterways.

Workhorses of Great Lakes Icebreaking – Investing in the Fleet

The Coast Guard provides icebreaking capabilities throughout the Great Lakes with one heavy domestic icebreaker, six 140-foot icebreakers, and two 225-foot ice-capable buoy tenders. 140-foot icebreakers stationed on the Great Lakes are the workhorses of the icebreaking fleet. They can reliably break flat ice up to 36-inches thick and back-and-ram through 9-foot ridges, while still being nimble enough to maneuver within the restricted confines of smaller waterways such as the St. Mary's River and St. Clair River.

The Coast Guard's newest domestic icebreaker, Coast Guard Cutter (CGC) *Mackinaw* is the only heavy domestic icebreaker in the fleet. CGC *Mackinaw* is used to break ice in the most challenging conditions, with plate ice often exceeding 42-inches, and ridges greater than 9-feet thick. CGC *Mackinaw's* unique azimuth pod propulsion system provides a combination of power and maneuverability that allows for vital evolutions, such as freeing a beset 1,000-foot long "laker" in the St. Mary's River.

This integrated system of icebreaking capabilities also includes two ice-capable 225-foot buoy tenders. While not designed to serve as dedicated icebreakers, these cutters can provide limited icebreaking services in ice up to 14-inches thick and have proven to be well-suited to escort commercial vessels in unrestricted areas such as the Straits of Mackinac. Combined with the assets of our Canadian Coast Guard and commercial icebreaking partners, this fleet delivers a unified approach to icebreaking that provides economies of scale and the flexibility to address evolving mission needs in dynamic environmental conditions.

The Coast Guard recently completed a Fleet Mix Analysis which recommended a future fleet of in-kind capacity to replace this current fleet. The results showed a need for another heavy domestic icebreaker to meet future service needs across the Great Lakes. The ability to achieve continued success in this mission and reliably facilitate navigation within the MTS year-round requires sustainment and modernization of the Coast Guard's domestic icebreaking fleet, and I am committed to developing the next system of icebreaking assets.

Consistent with Congressional direction, we are focused on acquiring a second heavy domestic icebreaker, at least as capable as CGC *Mackinaw*. We established a Great Lakes Icebreaking Program Management Office to analyze requirements for the next generation of domestic icebreaking capability and have completed pre-acquisition activities, readying the Service to advance upon receipt of an appropriation. The FY 2024 President's Budget requests \$55 million to fund initial acquisition activities and prepare for the purchase of long lead time materials for a second heavy domestic icebreaker. I look forward to continuing to work with Congress to support this acquisition.

Conclusion

The Great Lakes MTS is instrumental to economic and national security. Iced-in conditions increase the possibility of supply-chain disruptions and delays, which can result in impacts to the economy and increased costs to consumers. The Coast Guard's Great Lakes icebreaking fleet is essential to provide access and mobility as industry works efficiently and effectively to move pivotal cargoes of iron ore, limestone, coal, and cement during shortened shipping seasons. We are steadfastly committed to sharpening the services we provide.

The Coast Guard is the only military Service outside the Department of Defense and the only Armed Force that is primarily funded via non-defense appropriations. Not funding the Coast Guard at the levels requested in our budget jeopardizes the long-term readiness of the Service, putting American lives, national security, and the U.S. MTS at risk. I ask for your support to ensure the Coast Guard—like every U.S. Armed Force—has the resources necessary to safeguard the Nation.

With the support of the Administration and Congress, your Coast Guard will continue to live up to our motto—Semper Paratus—Always Ready. Thank you for your enduring support.