



**TESTIMONY OF
REAR ADMIRAL JONATHAN P. HICKEY
COMMANDER, NINTH DISTRICT, U.S. COAST GUARD**

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 the Ninth District Commander, I am excited to discuss Great Lakes operations including domestic icebreaking, and to highlight examples of our recent successes and our ongoing efforts to advance mission excellence. The Sentinels of the Ninth District are committed to overcoming challenges so that we can continue to assure mission execution across the economic, strategic, and culturally significant maritime environment throughout the Great Lakes.

The Ninth District is responsible for a vast area of operations, covering 94,000 square miles with coastlines spanning a distance equivalent to the Atlantic coastline from Maine to Florida. This immense footprint requires a talented and dispersed workforce to provide the services needed to facilitate this region’s safe, secure, and robust Marine Transportation System (MTS). Nearly 2,500 Active Duty, Civilian, and Reserve personnel and 2,000 Coast Guard Auxiliarists operate from four Sectors, two Air Stations, 44 Small Boat Stations, four Marine Safety Units, two Marine Safety Detachments, seven Aids to Navigation Teams, and nine Coast Guard Cutters to carry out critical Coast Guard missions across the Great Lakes.

Ninth District Operations

The seasonality of the Great Lakes impacts the operations and services provided to this region’s mariners, industry, and waterways users. The environmental shift between “soft and hard water” seasons can be severe and is somewhat unique to this Coast Guard District, requiring tailored operations and specialized expertise for those who serve here. In Fiscal Year 2023, the Ninth District responded to 2,004 Search and Rescue (SAR) cases, the second largest number of SAR cases among all Coast Guard Districts, assisting 2,457 persons, and saving 805 lives.

It is worth noting that while most of these rescues occurred in the 100 days between Memorial Day and Labor Day, these figures also include search and rescue on ice covered waterways in the winter months. The Ninth District is purposefully trained for ice rescue and while overall SAR responses are fewer in the winter, each response is urgent and oftentimes more dangerous.

The Aids to Navigation mission is also affected by seasonality, as the Ninth District removes and replaces 1,210 summer aids with more resilient ice aids in the fall to withstand Great Lakes ice coverage. In the spring, this process is reversed, restoring the Aids to Navigation constellation to best mark waterways for both commercial and recreational mariners. Last year, Ninth District units also conducted more than 7,000 vessel inspections and investigations and responded to 401 Marine Environmental Response (pollution response) cases to protect the Great Lakes' sensitive environment and support the region's MTS.

The importance of the Ninth District's fleet of cutters is paramount to achieving success across this unique maritime domain. Annually, nine cutters participate in the largest domestic icebreaking mission, keeping commerce moving throughout the winter months. Although these cutters are focused on ice breaking in the winter, they are employed year-around. In fact, on an annual basis, they provide nearly 18,000 hours of service to the Great Lakes across all mission sets, including Icebreaking, Aids to Navigation, Search and Rescue, participating in interagency drills and exercises, supporting major marine events (e.g., substantial marine regattas), and providing law enforcement support to significant events (e.g., this year's National Football League Draft in Detroit and the Republican and Democratic National Conventions being held in Milwaukee and Chicago this coming summer).

Cutter Readiness

Cutters and crews do an exceptional job covering this expanse of operations while facing challenges to meet the mission. Our system of approach provides icebreaking capabilities throughout the Great Lakes with one heavy domestic icebreaker, six 140-foot icebreakers and two 225-foot ice-capable buoy tenders. The cutters are workhorses and essential to icebreaking operations; however, this system can be stressed in winter months when a casualty to our cutters places an increased strain on the others and impacts capacity to meet mission demands. Timeliness matters when breaking ice, as freeing a commercial ship beset by ice or providing flood control to coastal communities can have catastrophic consequences if we cannot provide the level of service and response time required.

Coast Guard Cutter (CGC) *Mackinaw*, our sole domestic heavy icebreaker is a key capability, essential to our icebreaking mission, providing the strength needed to operate in the most challenging ice conditions and vital to supporting the Great Lakes commercial fleet. That said, unscheduled maintenance can sideline this capability. A second Great Lakes icebreaker, as proposed in the President's 2024 budget, will provide much needed redundancy and capacity.

Any unscheduled maintenance due to system failures or long-lead times to replace failed parts puts a strain on our crews to find ways to provide for waterway availability, support SAR operations, and perform other missions. Sustaining this fleet is critical to meeting mission demands and providing adequate capability and capacity for the future.

Great Lakes Maritime Strategy Action Plan

As highlighted in past hearings on the Coast Guard's workforce, the Service faces personnel readiness challenges as a result of personnel shortages. Here in the Great Lakes, this is requiring more than 600 days of temporary duty surge staffing support to safely and effectively operate our fleet of icebreakers. We continue to be resilient and meet the needs of commerce and the public due to our dedicated workforce which is committed to getting the mission done. This team is clearly our greatest asset. We recognize this, which is why we are also prioritizing support for our workforce.

The uniqueness of the Great Lakes and areas where our units are located create challenges to obtaining timely medical care, including dental, mental, and behavioral health, often requiring long waits and significant travel to access needed services. Additionally, access to affordable housing within a reasonable commute to work is a stressor for many of our members who may struggle to find a home where their families can thrive in the dynamic markets of these idyllic, close-knit communities. These challenges can impact individual and operational readiness, family well-being, and retention. In January 2024, the Ninth District released the first-ever Great Lakes Maritime Strategy Action Plan, which is meant to focus our efforts on our highest priorities over the next 12 to 24 months. A key part of this Plan aims to bolster the readiness and resilience of our workforce, including actions to strengthen our Service culture and improve access to health care and affordable housing for our members and their families.

The Action Plan will guide the Ninth District to deliver the Coast Guard's vital services in new ways by focusing our efforts to ensure preparedness for emerging threats; further strengthen partner cooperation and stakeholder relationships; maintain the safe, secure, and efficient use of the Great Lakes MTS; protect the cyberspace of the Great Lakes MTS; optimize mission readiness and execution; and improve Coast Guard facilities.

Ninth District Success

Through the amazing work of those who serve in the Ninth District, operational success has been achieved and mission requirements have been met while remaining always ready to serve across the Great Lakes, including right here in Wisconsin. For example, recently our team executed two ice rescue cases on the same day, February 8, 2024. First, Coast Guard Station Sturgeon Bay and Air Station Traverse City supported the rescue of three people from an ice floe off Benderville, WI, with the New Franken Fire Department. Shortly after the rescue of those three lives, Station Sturgeon Bay and Air Station Traverse City responded to four individuals stranded on another ice floe off Bay Shore Park, WI. Station Sturgeon Bay successfully saved the stranded individuals with the support of first responders from Brown County. Additionally, in January 2024, Coast Guard Cutter *Mobile Bay*, homeported in Sturgeon Bay, broke a critical path through ice choked waters off Green Bay, ensuring three critical home heating oil deliveries totaling 10.5 million gallons made it to households in need.

Recognizing the inherent risk that accompanies the intense winter maintenance required to sustain the domestic commercial vessel fleet which operates in this region, the Ninth District Coast Guard operational commanders established a workgroup with key agencies to develop procedures to mitigate hazards that may arise in this compressed maintenance period.

This workgroup – the Great Lakes Marine Firefighting Task Force – combines federal, state, local, and industry expertise to prevent and effectively respond to major marine fires in ports like Sturgeon Bay, where much of this work is done. Looking ahead, Coast Guard Sector Lake Michigan has a significant role in the planning for the protection of the 2024 Republican National Convention being held in Milwaukee this July and the Democratic National Convention in Chicago this August. Sector personnel and assets will support the interagency team across the convention events and will lead security for events with proximity to the waterfront.

Conclusion

The Coast Guard’s Ninth District workforce is devoted every day to safeguarding the Great Lakes MTS. They are also devoted to the safety of those who rely on these waters for their livelihoods and recreation, and to delivering Coast Guard services in new ways to meet future challenges.

This team is getting the job done with the current operational fleet and existing facilities. The continued support of Congress to sustain our capabilities and provide healthcare, housing, and childcare services for our members and their families is critical to the long-term success of the Coast Guard’s Ninth District.