

Florida pilots defend existing system

Rajesh Joshi - Monday 15 February 2010

FLORIDA pilots have cited a state agency's reluctance to modify the existing pilotage system as proof that the current system "provides the greatest benefit to the public".

The pilots' stance comes in the face of a campaign under way since last year under the leadership of the Florida Association of Maritime Organisations, a new body whose 33-strong membership includes cruise majors that ply heavy traffic in state waters, as well as international cargo shipping companies.

Famo last week used a study released by Florida's Office of Programme Policy Analysis and Government Accountability to demand that the state legislature revamp a system that Famo described as "broken", and which is alleged to cost the shipping industry \$35m a year through high pilotage fees.

Under Famo's proposal, pilotage rates would require legislative approval. The Florida Harbour Pilots' Association said such a move "might further politicise rate setting".

Oppaga's report, Options to Modify Harbour Pilot Oversight Could Improve Regulation and Rate Setting, mentions measures such as exempting frequently calling international ships from compulsory pilotage; a formula to determine maximum pilots' fees; and a formula to determine the number of pilots at each port.

Oppaga notes the pilots' opposition and the industry's support for these options. Oppaga also lists advantages and disadvantages for each option. For instance, allowing foreign ship exemptions could "reduce shipping costs and make Florida's ports more competitive" on the one hand, but "pose increased safety, security and environmental risks" on the other.

As is customary in government audits, the Oppaga report was sent to the state's business and professional regulation agency for comment. The agency, in its written response, said some of the key options presented before it were "not workable" or "not possible".

Paul Kirchner, executive director and general counsel of the Washington-based American Pilots' Association, described Famo's publicity involving the Oppaga study as a "complete fabrication that goes beyond even extreme spin".

Mr Kirchner said: "What Famo refers to as findings and recommendations by Oppaga are nothing more than descriptions in the study of Famo's assertions and proposals."

FHPA president Joseph Brown weighed in on behalf of his constituency: "As watchdogs for the numerous cruise and cargoships coming in and out of our ports, 24 hours a day, 7 days a week, 365 days a year, we are committed to ensuring Florida's ports remain safe and secure. The study highlights that the advantages of the current piloting system far outweigh any possible disadvantages."

The FHPA added in a statement: "The study finds that if foreign-flagged ships were allowed to use their own foreign ship officers to navigate vessels into Florida's ports, the safety of the public and ports could be threatened."

Under US law, pilotage is generally a state matter. Mr Kirchner said Florida pilotage is on par with systems in other states, and the unique characteristics of each deepwater port, and local pilots' unsurpassed knowledge, make it more crucial to keep the current system unchanged.

A representative from a prominent Famo member, a major shipping company who did not wish to be identified, said Famo's concerns were legitimate, because pilotage fees in Florida were the highest in the country, and because the US system meant the company could not go to a rival provider for the service.