

Northern California Ship Traffic Needs the Best Navigators on Earth

By Captain Bruce Horton, Port Agent and President, San Francisco Bar Pilots Association

Earlier this month, California Board of Pilot Commissioners voted to recommend to the Legislature a modest 1.5% annual rate increase over four years for the San Francisco Bar Pilots, a group of highly skilled mariners who have been conducting shipping traffic in and out of the Golden Gate for more than 160 years.

In particular, the Commission found that the rate increase is justified due to an increase in expenses for the pilots, that pilot pay is appropriate when compared to other pilot associations around the country and that the increase – the first in five years -- won't discourage shipping business away from California ports.

As president of the San Francisco Bar Pilots Association, I am grateful and gratified for the Commission's decision. We have about 60 pilots who move more than 9,000 vessels a year, many of them the size of a San Francisco skyscraper. Our pilots work in daylight and in darkness, seven days a week, 24 hours a day and in nearly any weather condition imaginable.

Each day, San Francisco bar pilots are responsible for moving \$1.2 billion worth of cargo and the work we do provides jobs and keeps California competitive on a global scale.

To become a San Francisco bar pilot takes years of experience. Our members typically have served as ocean-going ship or tug boat captains before even qualifying to enter the training program. The water we work on covers some of the most challenging pilotage grounds in the world and includes the Sacramento-San Joaquin Delta as well as San Francisco and Monterey bays.

Prior to the formation of our association in 1850 (the first official act of the California Legislature), nearly anyone could claim to be a San Francisco bar pilot whether they had the requisite experience or not. The bottom of San Francisco Bay is littered with the remains of vessels whose captains were unlucky enough to select an unreliable and unskilled pilot.

Today, our clients include some of the largest shipping companies in the world and they appreciate the skill we provide to keep their vessels moving to and from port safely. In fact, a shipping company representative who sits on the Pilot Commission voted to approve our rate increase.

Unfortunately, the Pacific Merchant Shipping Association (PMSA) – a lobbying group that represents primarily foreign-based shippers – has sought to attack both us and the Pilot Commission on the issue of what rates shippers, not California taxpayers, should pay for experienced navigation services. This criticism is particularly ill-timed as it comes after PMSA's foreign shipping members recorded billions in profits in 2010.

In particular, PMSA has grossly distorted what a rate increase would mean for pilot income. As the Pilot Commission has noted, average pilot income could rise to \$432,000 by the year 2015. That

represents just a \$7,000 difference from what PMSA had been attempting to set as an income level for our association.

Furthermore, PMSA has made a completely specious environmental argument, suggesting that higher rates for our pilots will somehow prevent shipping companies from investing in environmental protections. This comes just a few months after PMSA suffered a resounding defeat in its three-year legal fight to oppose clean air regulations from the California Air Resources Board that now require ships to use cleaner fuel when operating near the California coast.

As a lobbying group, PMSA uses heavy handed tactics, particularly whenever costs might go up for its wealthy foreign shipping company members. Along with fighting clean air laws in California, PMSA has also sought to strong-arm the City of Long Beach into ceding control of oil exploration funds at the expense of Long Beach residents.

The truth is our pilots represent the upper echelon of maritime professionals. Our income and compensation is a reflection of the dangers of the job we perform, the skill required to navigate into and out of Northern California and the high volume of shipping traffic we direct each year. Larger and larger ships are calling at California ports and greater skill is required to berth them safely.

Our income is not tied to any targeted dollar amount but rather to a rate that corresponds to a particular ship's gross tonnage. And those rates aren't paid by California taxpayers but rather by mostly foreign-owned companies who are getting a very good value in exchange for the safe and quick delivery of their expensive cargo.

With the America's Cup coming to San Francisco Bay in 2013, skilled pilotage will be all the more important to keep vessels belonging to PMSA's members moving into and out of Northern California. As the Pilot Commission has stated, a rate increase for our association is justified and we hope California legislators will agree. We also hope PMSA will stop twisting arms and the truth when it comes to the value of San Francisco bay pilots.