



American Maritime Officers

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Paul Doell
National President

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The Honorable Bennie G. Thompson
Chairman
Committee on Homeland Security
U.S. House of Representatives
H2-176 Ford House Office Building
Washington DC 20515

Via email:
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Mr. Chairman:

On behalf of the U.S. merchant marine officers we are privileged to represent, I ask urgently that the House Homeland Security Committee assist us in obtaining critical U.S. Coast Guard information that could avert casualties and save lives in the U.S. Great Lakes dry bulk merchant fleet and in the ports where these vessels load and discharge their cargoes.

The specific issue here is a poorly planned, economically unnecessary bareboat charter agreement under which American Steamship Co. shifted the operation and maintenance of five large, self-propelled vessels to Grand River Navigation — which provides insufficient, inexperienced and often incompetent engineers, mates and crews for these vessels in the transportation of iron ore, coal and limestone to Midwest steel, automotive and energy customers in the eight-state Great Lakes region. A bankrupt company, Rand Logistics LLC, now owns both American Steamship Co. and Grand River Navigation, which once were competitors.

The vessels involved in this transaction are the diesel-driven American Mariner, H. Lee White, John J. Boland, Sam Laud and American Courage.

In many cases, the engineers, mates and crewmembers dismissed from American Steamship Co. after many years of safe, efficient, productive and profitable service are replaced by personnel whose experience is limited to tug-barge combinations in the Grand River fleet, and their numbers often fall far short of Coast Guard requirements under the service's Certificate of Inspection — a situation certain to raise officer and crew fatigue to dangerous new levels.

Moreover, many of these newly assigned vessel officers and crews are not qualified to navigate, operate and maintain the larger, more powerful self-propelled ships diverted to Grand River Navigation by American Steamship Co.

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Reliable but necessarily anonymous on-scene reports tell of unreported COVID-19 contagion that forced an entire officer and crew complement from one vessel, flooded engine rooms on two of the five vessels, engineers puzzling over how to power-up the plant and a vessel crew list indicating a perilous shortfall of Able Bodied Seamen.

This still-developing crisis warrants complete, accurate accounts of U.S. Coast Guard inspections of these vessels as they began fitting out earlier this year for the 2021 Great Lakes shipping season and detailed reports on the adequacy of vessel personnel credentials.

In December 2019, the U.S. Coast Guard responded to an engine room fire aboard the Canadian-flagged Great Lakes bulk carrier Tecumseh near Zug Island on the U.S. side of the Detroit River. A contracted firefighting team boarded the vessel over night and extinguished the blaze — which roared for 20 hours. All 16 Tecumseh officers and crewmembers were evacuated safely from the ship — there were no casualties, no pollution and no vessel traffic delays.

The relevant point here is that the Tecumseh was operated by Lower Lakes Towing LLC, a third fleet owned by Rand Logistics LLC — our hope is that the Tecumseh fire does not portend comparable, potentially tragic incidents linked to the questionable bareboat charter agreement between American Steamship Co. and Grand River Navigation, which is said to extend 10 years.

We in American Maritime Officers appreciate the services provided by the U.S. Coast Guard on the Great Lakes. According to one 9th U.S. Coast Guard news release on July 27, 2020, the Coast Guard saved 56 lives and assisted 264 people in 81 recreational cases in one summer weekend— none of them centered on vessels in the Great Lakes bulk fleet. We are encouraged to know that Coast Guard men and women are faithful to their mission.

Thank you for the House Homeland Security Committee's assistance in providing the critical information we need to help protect lives, cargo, property and the environment on the Great Lakes and ashore. We stand ready to answer any questions you may have.

Respectfully,



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