



By Vic Lee , ALAMEDA, CA

## **Why does the Coast Guard hope to drastically lower the bar for tugboat pilots?**

Not a lot of people know about the proposed changes in the way new tugboat captains are trained, but seasoned mariners warn if the coast guard approves those changes, it could lead to more oil spill accidents on the bay. With 13 years experience as a tugboat captain, Josiah Layfield knows what it takes to push and pull 80,000 barrel oil barges.

He doesn't like the proposed changes in the training requirements that the coast guard is considering for operating these tugboats.

"If we open the door for anybody to come in and do the work without the correct qualifications, you sacrifice safety immediately," said tugboat master Captain Josiah Layfield.

There are a number of these proposed changes. But the one that worries tugboat captains the most would dramatically reduce the experience needed for "mates" -- the second in command -- from 30 months to 30 days. The training requirements currently include spending 30 months on the water as well as written tests.

Reducing the training time spent on a tugboat to only 30 days also worries Jonathon Mendes. He heads Starlight Marine Services which operates five barges. "As a company here, we're erring on the side of safety. We're concerned when we see a drastic change and the cutbacks in the regulations," said Jonathon.

Mendes is talking about the potential of more accidents like the one involving the Cosco Busan which spilled 58,000 gallons of fuel into the bay after hitting the Bay Bridge.

Warner Chabot is with the Ocean Conservancy Group. "To be blunt, it seems like a dumb and reckless policy. You don't play Russian roulette with San Francisco Bay," said Warner.

Tugboat master Jan Tiura, a captain for almost three decades, says learning to pilot these vessels takes time. "It's not just by the book. It's sensing, feeling the bay. Feeling the current, knowing what the winds are doing," said tugboat master Captain Jan Tiura.

Industry observers say the proposed change would make it easier for captains of fishing ships and other vessels to fill a shortage of tugboat captains.

The American Waterways Operators represents the tugboat and barge industry. It supports the changes citing that reason, saying: "The changes proposed, simply extend to masters of vessels under 200 gross tons the same opportunities to enter the towing vessel industry as have been in place for masters and mates of larger vessels since 2001."

The Coast Guard could not respond because they're prohibited from commenting on a rule change during the final phase of its decision-making process.

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