

BoatU.S. To Congress: Mandatory AIS Won't Solve Small-Boat Threat

Requiring recreational boaters to equip their vessels with expensive aircraft-style transponders to monitor boat movements is impractical and expensive, and it would overwhelm monitoring capabilities while failing to reduce the threat of terrorist operations from small boats in U.S. waters. That's the message BoatU.S. delivered to the Coast Guard and Maritime Transportation Subcommittee of the U.S. House of Representatives on Dec. 9. Testifying before the subcommittee, BoatU.S. Vice President Margaret Podlich told lawmakers that mandating Automatic Identification System (AIS) equipment, used to monitor commercial ship traffic, for recreational boats "would not produce any significant benefit for maritime security and would come at substantial cost to the taxpayer and the marine industry as a whole."

For several years the U.S. Coast Guard has suggested that requiring all recreational boats to install, program and use while underway what are known as Class B AIS transponders could make our harbors more secure. AIS equipment required for commercial ships transmits vessel identification, position, course and speed information to other mariners as well as to land-based vessel traffic control systems operated by ports and the Coast Guard. Following the terrorist attacks of Sept. 11, 2001, the Dept. of Homeland

Security tasked the Coast Guard to develop a "small-boat threat assessment" and a strategy to reduce the possibility of small watercraft being used by terrorists.

"The challenge with AIS is that it does not provide the ability to reduce the small-boat threat," Podlich said in her testimony. "For starters, the AIS unit on a small boat can simply be turned off. And more importantly, how could the Coast Guard monitor millions of new vessel



traffic movements? Monitoring would be overwhelming, on-the-water response inadequate, and it would be costly to taxpayers to build and operate the system," said Podlich. She also noted that boaters would be forced to pick up the tab for the AIS units, which currently start at about \$600, plus installation costs.

Instead, Podlich said Congress should fully fund America's Waterway Watch, a voluntary program through which recreational boaters can report suspicious activity on the water to local, state and federal authorities. She noted that the

program has already logged security successes and is more likely to succeed because "it treats boaters as part of the solution, rather than part of the problem, and it relies on boaters to know what does and does not look right on the water."

Podlich also told lawmakers that several government reports have concluded that working with recreational and commercial vessel operators is a key to increasing domestic maritime security. Boaters should know that they have the ability to report to the Coast Guard when they see something on the water that looks suspicious, she noted, but lamented the lack of congressional support for the voluntary program. "With all due respect, with an inconsistent budget, America's Waterway Watch is currently little more than a pamphlet campaign. Many boaters are still unaware of the program; they do not know what they are supposed to look for, or what number to call to report suspicious or unusual behavior. BoatU.S. supports shoring up America's Waterway Watch with more staff, operational structure and funding to make sure it works when needed," Podlich concluded. She committed BoatU.S.

to assist in critically needed education efforts with the recreational boating community. — R.L.

BoatU.S. believes that requiring millions of recreational boats to have Automatic Identification System equipment aboard would not help America's homeland security efforts.

U.S. COAST GUARD

