

# Mariners' Advisory Committee

for the Bay & River Delaware

Captain Stephen Roberts, Chairman

Captain H. Hickman Rowland Jr., Secretary

Organized 1964



Captain Rick Iuliucci, Treasurer

Captain Joseph F. Bradley, Honorary Chairman

The Honorable Senator Chris Coons  
127-A Russell Senate Office Building  
Washington, DC 20510

May 13, 2013

Dear Senator Coons:

As the chairman of the Mariners Advisory Committee, I write to you today to express my grave concerns about the defunding of one of the most critical components of the safety system on the Delaware River Basin: the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration's Physical Oceanographic Real-Time System, PORTS®.

## The Mariners Advisory Committee

The Mariners Advisory Committee for the Bay & River Delaware (MAC) is the federally mandated Harbor Safety Committee for the ports on the Delaware River. Formed in 1964, it is comprised of master mariners, pilots and other maritime professionals and concerns itself with safety of navigation, with particular regard to large ocean going vessels. The MAC works closely with the U.S. Coast Guard, National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA), U.S. Army Corp of Engineers, commercial vessel and terminal operators, and port industry personnel to recommend and promote safe navigation practices on the Delaware Bay and River, as well as the approaches to this very important waterway. We also participate on other local, regional and national committees related to safe navigation and port security such as the federally mandated Area Committee, a committee of local stakeholders responsible for environmental disaster recovery, the Marine Transportation System Recovery Unit (MTSRU) responsible for getting the port up and running after such an event and the Area Maritime Security Committee (AMSC) responsible for enhancing the security of our port system.

## Physical Oceanographic Real-Time System (PORTS®)

PORTS® is a system of tide, current and weather sensors positioned in key places along the Delaware Bay and River providing mariners and other users with real-time data on the ever changing condition of the waterway. The Delaware system is one of 21 systems located throughout the United States. PORTS® data is accessed by users via the internet and automated telephone. The Federal Government, through NOAA, funds the installation of the components of each system and monitors and maintains the data stream. Local funds support the operation and maintenance of the system with the funding mechanisms varying from port to port. These local funds have been provided by the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania through the Philadelphia Regional Port Authority. It costs approximately \$250,000 annually for O&M with additional costs for enhancements. Nationally the O&M cost is approximately \$4,000,000. Funding for this critical system is under pressure throughout the country and will disappear locally at the end of Fiscal Year 2013 when the components will be removed if no support stream is established.

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### **Maritime users of PORTS®**

The maritime industry is a prime, but not only, user of PORTS® data. Pilots, captains and other mariners can review the data prior to beginning a transit of the waterway. This real-time information allows us to make informed decisions based on actual, not predicted conditions that can affect the safety of life and the environment. Tide and weather conditions can vary widely from what has been predicted and knowing in advance what can be encountered along the route provides a much safer and efficient passage. Because the Delaware is a tidal river this is of critical importance. Large ships regularly transit the shipping channel with a rising tide allowing for the carriage of more cargo into our ports. Knowing prior to the beginning of a transit what environmental conditions we will encounter is of utmost importance to the safety of that passage. As a career ship pilot on the Delaware, PORTS® data is a crucial part my decision making process prior to and during my transit.

### **Emergency Management and PORTS®**

The MAC along with local, state and federal emergency response agencies use the PORTS® data when preparing for and responding to environmental events and incidents. In anticipation of a heavy weather event affecting our region, the United States Coast Guard will often stand up the Marine Transportation System Recovery Unit (MTSRU). As a critical partner in the MTSRU, the MAC uses PORTS® data help prevent and/or recover from damage to our port complex. 2011's Hurricane Irene was a prime example of how the Coast Guard and the MAC, using PORTS® information, were able to manage shipping traffic in the river above Philadelphia during the post storm period when tides were running far above normal preventing the possibility of hitting bridges or causing damage to other critical infrastructure. Similarly, PORTS® data was used during and after Super-storm Sandy to help protect vessels seeking shelter and to keep the Port open minimizing the storm's economic impact on the Delaware Valley Region. Unfortunately, the storm destroyed two critical sensors that may not be replaced without the restoration of funding.

During the recovery of the *Athos 1* oil spill in 2004, PORTS® data was used to track the movement of the oil so as to help mitigate the spill's impact on the environment. The Final Report of the Delaware River and Bay Oil Spill Advisory Committee, published in December 2010 highlighted the importance of the PORTS® system to preventing maritime accidents and associated pollution releases. In fact, Recommendation 14 of that report was to "fund the upgrade, continued operation, and maintenance of, the PORTS® system. That report indicates that PORTS® has the potential to prevent shipping accidents and subsequent environmental damage and save millions of dollars in response, restoration, and damage claims.

### **In Conclusion**

NOAA'S PORTS® program is used by mariners, emergency management agencies, departments of natural resources, public utilities, educational institutions and the general public in Delaware, Pennsylvania and New Jersey. I can easily imagine that PORTS® is used similarly in other coastal states where it is installed. The information PORTS® provides is invaluable to the economies of our ports and to the health and wellbeing of our estuaries. The Mariners Advisory Committee is asking you to support full federal funding for this vital program. This system is far too valuable to leave to the vagaries of local funding.

Sincerely yours,



Captain Stephen A. Roberts, Chairman  
Mariners Advisory Committee