

**Statement of
The Honorable James L. Oberstar
Subcommittee on the Coast Guard and Maritime Transportation
Hearing On
“Mariner Education and Workforce”
October 17, 2007**

Mr. Chairman, thank you for scheduling today’s hearing on Mariner Education and Workforce. Although vast bodies of water surround the U.S., the general public has little knowledge of maritime transportation and the role it plays on commerce. Americans should be aware of how retail stores get their goods, how foreign cars reach the car lots or how containers on 18 wheelers are transported by sea, rail and truck. The public should have a positive view of the maritime industry and its value to America’s economic health.

Vessels are primarily used to transport cargo, whether hazardous, dry bulk, liquids, rocks or people. These goods can be transported across the ocean, along our seaboard or through our rivers. Transporting goods by water is a highly effective method of moving large quantities of non-perishable goods and is significantly less costly than transportation by air for trans-continental shipping.

The Coast Guard’s Marine Transportation System study predicts maritime trade to double or triple by 2020. The study also highlights the current downward trend of available mariners, domestic and international, which if it continues, the nation’s future shipping demand will not be met. With this trend, I am concerned that the U.S. will not be positioned to handle the increase in maritime trade. Although there may not be a current shortage of mariners, the statistics of mariner’s age and the difficulty of recruiting and retaining the mariners will eventually create a shortage. As 30 percent of inland mariners are eligible to retire in the next seven years, and the average age of a merchant mariner with a Master’s license being over the age of 50, there is a foreseeable problem in the near future.

I would like to hear workable solutions to resolve this possible shortage before it becomes critical. Based on witness testimony, we will hear about the effects of the Standards of Training, Certification and Watchkeeping requirements, which are known as STCW. These requirements mandated additional safety training for most mariners. Statistics show that 80 percent of all casualties are caused by human element failure. By improving the human element performance, 80 percent of the casualties can possibly be prevented. There is a place for safety requirements in the maritime industry, but I’m interested in hearing how these standards are being implemented and how they are affecting the mariner workforce.

With regard to mariner education, training lets the mariners know that they are important to the industry. In Houston, Kirby Corporation has a training facility staffed with 18 full-time instructors. They teach everything from Coast Guard approved classes for greenhorns to wheelhouse training and tanker man certifications. The company chooses about ten out of 100 interviewees to attend its 12 day, 120 hour basic deckhand training. Kirby has a 95 percent retention rate of recruits that come through their training center. They believe there is a cost advantage of growing your own. That’s an example of a company that has succeeded in retaining its personnel by ensuring their training needs are met. Kirby’s employees are

advancing in the company through the hawsepape, while meeting the STCW requirements. Employer paid training is an incentive for prospective mariners.

I am looking forward to the testimony of our third panel who will discuss solutions, recommendations and best practices. Today I hope to learn about the issues that pertain to mariner education and identify areas that are affecting the recruitment and retention of ocean, offshore, coastal and inland mariners. I look forward to hearing from the witnesses today and to working with the ranking members Mica and LaTourette as we explore the needs for additional mariners to accommodate the requirements of our marine transportation system.