

**Statement of
The Honorable Elijah Cummings
Subcommittee on the Coast Guard and Maritime Transportation
Hearing On
“Coast Guard Icebreaking”
July 16, 2008**

The Subcommittee convenes today to consider our nation’s icebreaking needs, as well as the resources available to meet these needs. We convene at a critical time in history, when the continued use of fossil fuels is contributing to changes in the world’s climate that appear in turn to be causing the rapid melting of polar ice – an occurrence that will likely have significant consequences for the United States and indeed for the world.

I thank Congressman Larsen, who specifically requested that we hold this hearing, for his dedication to ensuring that we are prepared to meet America’s interests in the polar regions.

The Coast Guard’s icebreaking responsibilities can be divided into two categories: polar icebreaking and icebreaking along domestic waterways, particularly on the Great Lakes, and along the East Coast. Today’s hearing will examine anticipated needs and current capabilities in both areas.

In the Arctic, the melting of polar ice packs is accelerating to the point that the National Snow and Ice Data Center has reported that by September of this year, the North Pole may briefly be ice free. The melting of polar ice is a catalyst for what appears to be increasing interest in the creation of new shipping passages, particularly in the Arctic, as well as a new scramble for the assertion of national control over natural resources.

As shipping traffic increases in the polar regions, the Coast Guard may need to expand its presence to provide many of its traditional services, including search and rescue operations. Additionally, icebreaking capacity is required to resupply the Antarctic research station McMurdo.

Unfortunately, the Coast Guard currently has more limited polar icebreaking capacity than at any time since World War II. The service’s two heavy icebreakers, the Polar Star and the Polar Sea, have now both exceeded their intended 30-year service lives. The Polar Star has been placed on caretaker status. The Polar Sea is scheduled to undergo a major maintenance. Both vessels will need hundreds of millions of dollars of repairs and upgrades if they are to continue in service. The Coast Guard’s only other polar icebreaker, the cutter Healy, was commissioned in 2000 and has many years of service life left. Unfortunately, the Healy does not offer the same icebreaking capabilities as the Polar Star or the Polar Sea.

In preparation for the opportunities and challenges that will be created by the rapid changes occurring in the polar regions, Congress must take a comprehensive look at our nation’s entire range of polar mission needs. We look forward to the testimony of Admiral Thad Allen, the Commandant of the Coast Guard, regarding the Coast Guard’s specific mission priorities in the Arctic and Antarctic.

I note that traditionally, the Coast Guard's polar icebreaking missions have been conducted largely in support of the National Science Foundation, which now pays the Healy's operating and maintenance costs. However, the Foundation has suggested that alternatives not involving the use of military vessels may potentially meet its research needs in a more cost-effective manner. If that is the case, we must carefully examine whether the United States should build new icebreakers and, if so, what specific purposes they should be built to serve. Further, we must assess how all of the parties that would benefit from the construction of new icebreakers can participate equitably in their capital costs.

The other critical icebreaking missions performed by the Coast Guard involve breaking ice on the Great Lakes and along the East Coast of the United States. From Maine as far south as the Chesapeake Bay, the Coast Guard relies on 140-foot icebreaking tug boats and coastal and sea-going buoy tenders to conduct icebreaking operations. Put simply, these operations are essential to ensure that the heating fuel that keeps millions of East Coast residents warm in winter reaches them as needed.

Icebreaking on the Great Lakes is currently conducted by the Mackinaw, a 240-foot dual purpose buoy tender, two 225-foot buoy tenders, and five 140-foot icebreaking tug boats. Unfortunately, these vessels do not appear to be providing all needed icebreaking services on the Lakes, across which extensive shipments of coal and other raw materials are moved even in the winter. As a result, during the last winter, several vessels on the Great Lakes suffered ice-related damage.

Today's witnesses include Mr. James Weakley, President of the Lake Carriers' Association, who will speak in more detail about icebreaking needs on the Great Lakes. Additionally, we will hear from the National Science Foundation and the Arctic Research Commission regarding their specific research support needs as well as the growth being observed in shipping and other activities in the polar regions. We have joined these three organizations on a single panel in an effort to hear the unique perspectives of the agencies and commercial interests that are in essence "consumers" of the icebreaking services provided by the Coast Guard, and we look forward to their testimony to help inform our understanding of the multiple facets of our nation's icebreaking needs.