

Coast Guard Delays Removal of Navigational Buoys

*Thank you to those of you who sent in your comments related to the initial proposal. More information to follow when a revised proposal is announced.

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BOSTON — The Coast Guard says it will delay plans to remove hundreds of navigational buoys from New England waters following pushback from mariners and congressional lawmakers.

In a letter to U.S. senators, Coast Guard Director of Marine Transportation Systems Michael Emerson said the agency will “modify and extend” public engagement on the proposal after receiving initial feedback from lawmakers and mariners.

“I appreciate your concern that the Coast Guard slow down the effort to ensure that the needs of communities and mariners in your states are understood,” he wrote in an Aug. 12 letter, details of which were released Monday by Maine Sen. Angus King’s office. “Accordingly, the Coast Guard will modify and extend the process.”

Emerson said the Coast Guard’s Northeast District will be reviewing public comments on the proposal and will “re-advertise with any changes to the current proposal.” He didn’t provide a timeline for that review, but it said it will include changes from the original proposal.

“This notice will include changes to aids in the vicinity of proposed discontinuations (such as relocations, lighting, or increased nominal range); which will provide users a more complete change picture,” he wrote.

The Coast Guard’s plan, in the works for years, calls for removing 350 of the 4,700 navigational buoys located in waters from New York to the Canadian border, including dozens off Cape Ann and the North Shore. Over the next five years, up to 1,000 buoys could be removed from the water, the agency said.

The project, which doesn’t require congressional approval, is meant to “rightsize” the number of buoys on the water, and will improve waterway safety “by ensuring the right short-range aids work well with modern navigation technology.”

But the project has raised safety concerns, especially among commercial fishermen, who've panned the plan as a cost-cutting move that compromises safety by removing physical navigation aids.

Mariners raised concerns about reducing the number of buoys, which would mean they would have to rely solely on electronic navigational systems to traverse the channels and avoid rocky ledges under the surface of the water.

In June, King and other New England lawmakers — including Massachusetts Sens. Elizabeth Warren and Ed Markey — urged the Coast Guard to delay the removal of navigational buoys to give the public more time to provide feedback on the plans. They expressed public safety concerns about the proposal.

“As you are well aware, mishaps continue to show the need for mariners to competently pilot their vessels, and effective coastal piloting relies on GPS, radar and visual navigational aids including buoys, beacons, lights, ranges and lighthouses,” they wrote.

Congressman Seth Moulton, a Salem Democrat, pushed for an amendment to a Coast Guard re-authorization bill that would require the federal agency to conduct a “comprehensive” study of its plans amid concerns it could jeopardize safety on the waterways.

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