

Testimony of the Columbia River Pilots
by
Captain Steven Woods, President
Before the Portland Planning and Sustainability Commission

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I am Captain Steven Woods, President of the Columbia River Pilots. The Pilots were asked to comment today on our ability to safely navigate propane-carrying tank vessels up and down the Columbia River. There is reportedly concern in some quarters about an increase in the total number of ships that would be transiting the Columbia River due to the addition of propane tank vessels. Before addressing that specific issue, I would like to give you a little bit of background.

Members of the Columbia River Pilots are responsible for safe navigation of ocean-going vessels upstream from Astoria to the head of navigation on the Columbia and Willamette Rivers. The Pilots are providing testimony today as experts in the field of navigational safety. We take no position for or against the Pembina development, and we take no position with regard to whether the City Planning Code should be amended to allow the development to go forward. It is the longstanding policy of the Columbia River Pilots to take no position for or against any particular cargo. Our interest is safe navigation, and our services provide the highest levels of safety for all vessels, regardless of cargo. We pilot ships carrying gasoline the same way we pilot ships carrying bulk minerals, grain or automobiles; we do not relax our safety standards and practices under any circumstances.

A Columbia River Bar Pilot boards a ship at sea and guides it from sea to Astoria. A Columbia River Pilot then relieves the Bar Pilot in Astoria and directs the navigation of the vessel to its destination on the Columbia River system. We also dock and undock the ships at their respective berths and handle all harbor and inter-port moves, including dry-docking operations. The State of Oregon requires that we be present on board all foreign flagged vessels. The State of Washington defers to Oregon's regulation of pilotage, so we serve all ports on both sides of the Columbia River. In addition to compulsory pilotage on foreign flag vessels, virtually all domestic vessels, including U.S. Navy ships, employ our services to ensure their safe passage. To state it simply, no large ocean going vessel moves on the Columbia River unless there is a Columbia River Pilot on board.

To the issue at hand: We have no qualms regarding the numbers of ships that would be added to the system if the Pembina project is completed. We are operating at far below historic ship numbers and the addition of propane carriers would not cause us to reach capacity or impair navigational safety. To illustrate the point: In the 1980s, ship numbers were typically close to 2,200 per year. In 1988, there were 2,185 ships that called at the ports on the Columbia and Willamette Rivers. By 2001, activity had declined and we were serving 1,973 ships per year. By 2008, the number had dropped to 1803 ships. The downward trend continued, with 1,576 vessel arrivals in 2014. There is no indication that we were anywhere near the safe operating capacity at the 2,185-ship level in 1988, and even if that were the case, the current shipping levels are more than 600 ships per year less---about 27 percent lower---than those historic levels.

There is plenty of system capacity to safely absorb the extra ships that would call at the Pembina facility.

To be sure, ships have gotten larger over the last 25 years. However, this increase in size does not materially affect the capacity of the system to handle many more ships than are currently being served. In fact, infrastructure improvements have made navigation safer than ever. Most notably, we have added a Vessel Traffic Information System (VTIS) over the last 10 years that adds greatly to vessel safety. The Columbia River Pilots partnered with the Columbia River Steamship Operators and the United States Department of Transportation to develop and construct a highly sophisticated VTIS. This system puts real time information in the hands of the pilots on board vessels via laptop computers the pilots carry aboard ship. The entire River system is visible to pilots, something impossible with radar and other electronic navigation equipment. Pilots now have precise, constant, real time information about the locations of all ship and tug traffic anywhere in the Rivers and even approaching from sea. Using this VTIS system we can accurately predict meeting points and make the necessary maneuvering adjustments to meet and pass other traffic in desirable and predetermined locations.

The sizes of vessels being discussed for use at the Pembina facility are similar to Panamax dimensions and are well within the safe operating envelope for members of the Columbia River Pilots. There is ample system capacity to easily absorb the numbers of vessels of this size that might be added by the proposed propane export facility. If the facility is completed, vessels transiting to and from it would receive the same, exemplary level of safe service currently afforded all vessels by the Columbia River Pilots.

One additional point of confusion we were asked to address relates to what some are wrongly calling an "exclusion zone" around a propane ship while in the river. When actually required, these are more correctly called "safety and security zones" that change in size depending on the status of the vessel or facility. Whether propane vessels would require a safety and security zone while in the River is a decision for the Coast Guard and, as far as I am aware, no decision has yet been made on that topic.

Even if required, a safety and security zone is not likely to inconvenience anyone or create problems for other traffic. River users have regularly been dealing with security zones in the past with no disruptions. In most cases, other River users were not even aware of the existence of such zones because they presented no obvious inconvenience. For example, safety and security zones are required around cruise ships calling in Astoria and no one has asserted the cruise ships are creating unmanageable hardships on River traffic. Some of the petroleum carriers moving up and down the River have similar zones, yet no interruption of river use has been experienced. Other traffic and River users routinely pass through these zones as they approach these vessels or as the vessels approach them. For most of the last two years up until a few months ago, there were security zones around all grain ships calling at two of our busiest grain terminals, one in the Willamette River and the other on the Columbia River in Vancouver, due to labor problems at those facilities. Most people were not even aware those security zones existed because such zones typically do not interfere with other, legitimate uses of the waterways.

Safety and security zones primarily represent a heightened area for awareness by law enforcement officials, which means that anyone or anything within that zone will undergo more scrutiny and observation until clear. If such zones are eventually required for propane vessels by the Coast Guard, it is unlikely the zones would inconvenience other River users.

Thank you for the opportunity to comment. The Columbia River Pilots would be pleased to be a resource to the PSC and hope you will include us in any future discussions regarding navigation issues.

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