

A Message from The American Waterways Operators 99% of Towing Vessel Operators Properly Licensed, Coast Guard “Operation Big Tow” Finds

The men and women operating U.S. tugboats and towboats overwhelmingly hold the proper licenses for their position, a Coast Guard enforcement campaign has confirmed. “Operation Big Tow,” conducted from November 2008 to January 2009 throughout the inland river system, found that 99% of mariners whose licenses were checked by the agency held the proper license.

Significantly, the Coast Guard operation found a strong positive correlation between compliance with a safety management system (SMS), such as the AWO Responsible Carrier Program, and compliance with agency licensing requirements: the one-third of surveyed vessels that did not have an SMS accounted for more than two-thirds of the licensing deficiencies. Both the National Transportation Safety Board and the congressionally authorized Towing Safety Advisory Committee have recommended that a safety management system be required for all towing vessels, and such a requirement is expected to be included in proposed Coast Guard regulations for towing vessel inspection slated for publication this year.

Out of more than 4,200 licenses reviewed, the Coast Guard found only 39 deficiencies, most of them minor problems. For example, out of more than 2,600 licenses checked in Coast Guard Sectors Lower Mississippi River, Upper Mississippi River, and Ohio Valley, only four deficiencies were found. Three of the four were mariners who held a valid license but did not have the original document with them, and the fourth was found via a company audit on a towing vessel that was not underway.

In response to the Operation Big Tow findings, LCDR Robert Keister, chief of vessel and facility inspection for the Coast Guard’s Eighth District, commented that “The high percentage of vessels in compliance with Coast Guard standards is not surprising. Industry members have always tried to do the right thing, ensuring that their vessels are operated safely by licensed operators.”

A 2009 study conducted by the Texas Transportation Institute and sponsored by the U.S. Maritime Administration affirmed that the barge and towing industry is the safest mode of surface transportation, resulting in the lowest rate of fatalities, injuries, and hazardous material spills among the surface transportation modes.

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July 8, 2009

