



**The American Waterways Operators**

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Anne Davis Burns  
Vice President - Public Affairs

July 10, 2009

Editor

The Associated Press  
New Orleans Bureau  
1515 Poydras Street, Suite 2500  
New Orleans, LA 70112-3723

Dear Editor,

The inaccuracies of Cain Burdeau's July 8 story, "Tugboat Pilot Plan May Have Backfired," did a great injustice to the tugboat, towboat and barge industry, an industry that is the safest, most environmentally friendly mode of cargo transportation in the nation, according to a recent study conducted by the Texas Transportation Institute for the Department of Transportation. The members of the American Waterways Operators, encompassing upwards of 80 percent of the barge and towing industry, have a reputation as industry safety leaders and a long history of commitment to safety, security and environmental protection.

The fundamental premise of the article – that the modernized licensing process put in place in 2001 makes it easier for inexperienced personnel to pilot tugboats or towboats – is completely wrong. In fact, the new system requires more, not less, "behind the wheel" experience to gain a pilot's license, increasing by a full 25 percent the amount of service time required to become a towing vessel master. The system also includes, for the first time, a hands-on demonstration of navigational proficiency – a real-world "driver's test" to ensure that candidates have not only the theoretical knowledge but the practical skills to operate safely. Mr. Burdeau's suggestion that the rules were developed to bring more pilots into the industry in response to a recent personnel shortage is simply wrong; in fact, the overhaul of the licensing system (a lengthy process that began in 1994) was aimed at establishing more rigorous qualification and training requirements as a way to reduce the likelihood of accidents based on human error. AWO was an active participant in the Coast Guard rulemaking process and would have been pleased to provide more information about it, had Mr. Burdeau raised this central issue with us before writing his story.

The article's assertion of a 25 percent increase in industry accidents makes good headlines, but is also misleading, as Mr. Burdeau chose as his base year (2003), a year with unusually low recorded casualties by historical standards. (Coast Guard data experts have speculated that this may have been the result of a reorganization in Coast Guard field units that resulted in less attention to minor casualties such as bump-and-go groundings that result in no injury or property damage.) In fact, Coast Guard statistics show that the industry's

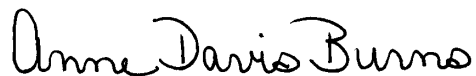
safety record has consistently improved over the past decade, with record low fatalities, oil spills, and serious accidents in recent years.

It is counterintuitive to suggest that companies would put lives, the environment, and multi-million dollar cargo and equipment at risk by placing inexperienced pilots at the helm, not to mention undertaking the risk of liability and potential loss of the company itself in the wake of a serious accident or spill. Any company that operates in the manner that Mr. Burdeau's article describes – with new pilots unsupervised, and safety practice requirements ignored – is breaking the law and should be prosecuted. It is irresponsible for Mr. Burdeau to have suggested by his article that the illegal practices of a few rogue operators describe the entire industry.

The inspection program that Mr. Burdeau referenced at the end of the article is an initiative that AWO strongly supports and has worked with the Coast Guard to develop. The "Operation Big Tow" effort by the Coast Guard "to crack down on tugs that break the rules" found that 99.8 percent of towing vessel operators were properly licensed.

Had Mr. Burdeau done his due diligence, he could not have painted his picture with such a broad brush. We would appreciate the *Associated Press* correcting the record with all the *AP* outlets across the country that have now published this story as an accurate reflection of the truth.

Yours truly,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Anne Davis Burns". The signature is written in black ink and is positioned below the "Yours truly," text.

Anne Davis Burns