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Jill Bessetti
Vice President – Southern Region

April 7, 2026

Mr. Doug Blakemore
Bridge Administration Branch Chief
U.S. Coast Guard Heartland District
500 Poydras St.
New Orleans, LA 70130

Re: Drawbridge Operation
Regulation; San Bernard River,
Brazoria County, Texas (USCG-
2025-0070)

Dear Mr. Blakemore:

The American Waterways Operators (AWO) is the tugboat, towboat, and barge industry's advocate, resource, and united voice for safe, sustainable, and efficient transportation on America's waterways, oceans, and coasts. As the largest segment of the nation's 40,000-vessel domestic maritime fleet, our industry safely and efficiently moves 665 million tons of cargo each year and enables the flow of goods through ports on the inland and intracoastal waterways; the Atlantic, Pacific and Gulf coasts; and the Great Lakes.

AWO appreciates the opportunity to comment on the U.S. Coast Guard's proposal to change the operating regulations for the Union Pacific Railroad Drawbridge at mile 20.7 that crosses the San Bernard River to allow for remote operation.

AWO members report transits through the Union Pacific Railroad Drawbridge Mile 20.7 span during the test deviation have gone smoothly and communication has been consistent. However, AWO members continue to highlight operational concerns and report an alarming number of allisions and near-miss events involving remotely operated bridges closing on vessels with little or no effective warning. Each event carries the potential for significant property damage, environmental harm, and loss of life. A serious marine incident in 2022 underscores these concerns, in which a railroad bridge across the Mobile River closed on a towing vessel attempting to transit with three empty and four loaded hopper barges. The

incident resulted in significant damage to the vessel and tow and could easily have resulted in fatalities.

AWO offers the following comments on USCG-2025-0070 based on these concerns:

1. We recognize that the Coast Guard has developed a [Bridge Remote/Automated Operation Request Guide](#) and encourage the agency to consider information submitted through that process when evaluating future test deviations and proposed rulemakings. Recognizing the sensitivity of certain information contained within this guide, AWO believes “Section 4: Remote Operations plan” and “Section 5: Contingency plan” provide particularly valuable insight for our members. We encourage continued collaboration with industry, bridge owners and operators in the establishment of safety standards for remote operations.
2. The growing number of incidents and near misses involving remote bridge operations underscores the need for comprehensive safety protocols and operational guidelines. We request the Coast Guard to fully investigate incidents involving remote bridge operations and work with vessel operators to determine how to best minimize risk before authorizing additional projects.
3. We request that the Coast Guard treat any failure of a remote operation system, as outlined by the bridge owner in the Bridge Remote/Automated Operation Request Guide, as an operational failure, given the potential loss of situational awareness, safe and reliable operation, and the ability to communicate with mariners.
4. If the remote-control system equipment is partially disabled or fails for any reason, we expect the bridge owner/operator to shift to local control and physically operate the bridge as soon as possible, but no later than 60 minutes after the malfunction or disability of the remote system. The bridge owner/operator shall provide and maintain mechanical bypass and override capability until remote operation capabilities are restored.
5. Understanding 33 USC 494 and 33 CFR 117.7 we request that if the bridge experiences a mechanical failure preventing its reliable operation it be maintained in the open to navigation position until reliable operation is restored.

Thank you for the opportunity to comment on USCG-2025-0070. AWO would be happy to answer any questions or provide additional information as needed.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Jill Bessetti". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a prominent initial "J" and a stylized "B".

Jill Bessetti
Vice President – Southern Region