The American Waterways Operators

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Jill Bessetti
Vice President – Southern Region

November 6, 2026

Rear Admiral Will E. Watson
Commander, Heartland District
U.S. Coast Guard Heartland District
500 Poydras Street, Room 1328
New Orleans, Louisiana 70130

Re: Drawbridge Operation Regulation; USCG-2026-0889

Dear Rear Admiral Watson:

The American Waterways Operators 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 45,000-vessel domestic maritime fleet, our industry plays a vital part in America's supply chain and national security, moving the nation's commerce on U.S. inland and intracoastal waterways, the Atlantic, Pacific and Gulf Coasts, and the Great Lakes. On behalf of AWO's more than 300 member companies, we appreciate the opportunity to provide comments on the Coast Guard's Notice of Proposed Rulemaking (NPRM) to allow five CSX Transportation drawbridges in Alabama and Mississippi to be operated from a remote location.

AWO members are deeply committed to the safety of their mariners and those that share the waterways on which they operate, including bridge users. In the 30 years since the Coast Guard-AWO Safety Partnership was established to proactively address shared safety and environmental challenges, bridge allisions have been one of the Partnership's areas of sustained focus. From past casualties, our members have taken seriously their responsibility to improve industry safety and have supported changes to both industry practices and federal laws and regulations. Our priority remains to work with the Coast Guard and other stakeholders to support safe, reliable towing vessel and barge transits at all bridges over navigable waterways, whether fixed or movable, traditionally manned or remotely operated. However, in recent years, our members have experienced increasing delays and other issues at movable bridges nationwide. In some cases, operational or communication failures have resulted in near misses and marine casualties that narrowly avoided catastrophic consequences. We oppose this remote operations proposal based on this history, our members' recent reports,

and AWO's broader concerns regarding Coast Guard oversight of both traditionally manned and remotely operated drawbridges.

Our concerns are not new. In 2022, when CSX first sought remote operation of the Bay St. Louis and Pascagoula River bridges in this notice, industry raised these concerns. At that time, AWO urged the Coast Guard to fully investigate recent allisions involving remotely operated bridges, develop a process to better monitor bridge operations, and determine whether additional protocols were needed before authorizing further remote operations. The Gulf Intracoastal Canal Association similarly opposed remote operation until a root cause analysis of each recent casualty was completed. While both organizations continue to submit similar letters in response to remote operation proposals, we are not aware that these steps were taken, and our concerns and recommendations remain the same (see Enclosures (1) and (2)).

Our Concerns with the Proposed Rule and Why We Oppose It

Delays are the most frequent operational problem our members experience at movable bridges nationwide. Beyond lost time and added cost, a delayed opening forces a towing vessel to hold position, often in current, tide, or wind, sometimes close to the bridge structure, which can increase risk. These delays persist despite the requirement that drawbridges open promptly and fully when a proper signal is given. AWO is concerned that without adequate situational awareness, communication, and oversight, remote operation could make delays, near misses, and allisions more frequent.

Bridge delays and other issues can have serious safety consequences. Coast Guard Sector Mobile's Findings of Concern (FOC) 012-23 outlines some of the exact circumstances our members face when bridge tenders do not clearly communicate with vessel operators and operate bridges in an unsafe manner. In at least two incidents since 2022, the early and unexpected closure of the draw span of a movable bridge caused damage to towing vessels. Numerous other incidents highlight concerning communication failures between vessels and bridge tenders, and an incident this year involving the premature closure of a bridge on an asphalt barge remains under investigation. While the Coast Guard has investigated or is actively investigating these incidents, AWO has seen little public information about corrective actions taken by bridge owners, learnings, or other findings that would help to prevent the same incidents from occurring in the future. This notice is the first, to our knowledge, in which previous incidents have been discussed in the docket.

Given these incidents, the concerns raised by our members, and the limited information available on the steps CSX and the Coast Guard have taken to ensure safe and reliable remote operation, AWO does not support finalizing this rule at this time. We urge the Heartland District to pause this rulemaking and any additional ongoing or future remote bridge operation proposals until the bridge owners demonstrate publicly that remote operation can be conducted safely and reliably, without unreasonable delays, and the concerns raised in these comments regarding Coast Guard oversight are addressed.

As these concerns are not unique to this District, AWO is also sharing these comments with Coast Guard Headquarters. As the agency with regulatory authority over drawbridge operations and navigation safety, we urge Headquarters to convene a national stakeholder group of vessel operators, bridge owners, and other appropriate federal agencies and

stakeholders to review historical casualties and delays at movable bridges and develop consistent safeguards for movable bridge operations that prevent unnecessary delays to marine traffic and premature bridge closures; devise a national level reporting process for delays and other safety concerns regarding movable bridges; and institute an effective enforcement regime that supports safe and reliable movable bridge operations nationally. AWO would welcome the opportunity to participate and is aware of additional interested parties.

Safety and Operational Recommendations When the Rulemaking Proceeds

AWO supports the responsible use of technology to improve bridge operations, but only where remote operation provides a level of safety and service to mariners equivalent to traditional on-site bridge tender operation. If and when the Coast Guard eventually elects to finalize this rulemaking, we offer the following recommendations.

- **Safeguards Against Premature Closure.** The final rule should include specific safeguards to prevent a span from closing on a vessel. As described in FOC 012-23 and the Federal Register notice for this proposed rulemaking, the 2022 Mobile River casualty occurred when a bridge tender overrode the bridge's safety sensors and closed the span. AWO believes the primary safeguard should rest with the bridge operator, not the mariner. Often when a vessel has committed to a bridge transit there are limited options to stop the vessel if a bridge begins to close prematurely or unexpectedly, or does not open as communicated.

- **AIS Capability.** The final rule should require Automatic Identification System (AIS) capability at the bridges included in this test and at the remote operation center. Depending on waterway geometry, vessel operators may be unable to see a bridge until they commit to transiting it or take emergency actions to prevent an allision or collision; AIS would allow them to monitor bridge status without a visual line of sight, allowing for safer transits and greater overall situational awareness. Similarly, AIS monitoring capability at remote bridge operator sites would give bridge tenders greater situational awareness. This AIS capability might also assist in Coast Guard oversight of bridge operations.

AWO greatly appreciates the inclusion of the safety provisions in the proposed regulatory text regarding circumstances in which the bridge must be kept open to navigation and supports these measures being included in this and future rulemaking proposals. In prior comments, AWO requested that qualified personnel return a bridge to local operation within 60 minutes of a remote system failure; the open-to-navigation requirement better protects mariners by eliminating the risk of a closed or unmonitored span during that 60-minute period. AWO requests that the final rule make clear that this requirement applies to the failure or degradation of any critical component of the remote operation system, including loss of camera visibility, radio communications, or AIS functionality. Monitoring systems on remotely operated drawbridges are intended to provide situational awareness commensurate with an on-site tender, and the failure of any part of this monitoring system would materially degrade situational awareness. The Coast Guard should require that a bridge be kept open to navigation until situational awareness and safe operation can be restored either by placing a tender physically at the bridge or by restoring the monitoring systems used in remote operation.

Need for Greater Transparency in Application, Investigation, and Enforcement

When a bridge owner requests a change from on-site bridge operation to remote or automated operation, the Coast Guard should require them to demonstrate, through test-period data on openings, delays, communications, and system failures, that remote operation provides service equivalent to an on-site tender, and this data should be published or summarized in the notice of proposed rulemaking so that other waterways users can assess and respond to it.

It is difficult for AWO and other stakeholders to evaluate a Coast Guard proposal to approve requests for remote operation of movable bridges that do not provide specific information about the request, test-period data, the operational and safety record of the bridge operator, and the Coast Guard's assessment of risk. To allow mariners and other stakeholders to meaningfully evaluate and provide comments on this and future remote operation proposals, AWO recommends that:

- Information contained in remote operation application packages, including safety assessments and proposed failure protocols, be included or summarized in Federal Register notices proposing to authorize remote operation or made available in the rulemaking docket. This information would support bridge owners in explaining how their remote operations would provide equivalent safety to an on-site tender.

- Public access be provided to records of prior reported delays, near misses, and navigation disruptions at movable bridges, as well as any corrective or enforcement actions taken in response to mariner complaints. Federal law prohibits unreasonable delays in opening a draw after a proper signal and authorizes civil penalties for violations, and mariners may submit complaints to the relevant Coast Guard District Commander. However, our understanding is that penalty proceedings are not publicly reported, so mariners and the public have no visibility into whether complaints result in any action. Even in Sector Mobile's FOC 012-23, where the Coast Guard identified bridge-tender error as a contributing factor in a casualty, the publicly visible response consisted of ending remote operation of the bridge and issuing a voluntary advisory. AWO is not aware of any publicly reported penalty or other enforcement action.

- The Coast Guard establish a national process for mariners to report operational issues at movable bridges, with reports systematically tracked internally and made part of the record for any subsequent rulemaking. Some Districts have already created District-specific reporting mechanisms that demonstrate how this information could be voluntarily collected at a larger scale. In addition to the information requested on existing delay reports, these reports should include fields for reporters to note the length of the delay, the severity of the delay's adverse impact on their operations and why, and whether they believe the delay was intentional and why. We have heard from our members that captains often do not complete reports in detail, or submit reports at all, because of a long-standing perception that reports do not lead to action. We have many members who tell us that they have reported delays or other issues and never received a response. If the Coast Guard were to renew its oversight efforts by acting on reports, following up with reporters, and making any penalties enforced more widely known, mariners would begin reporting delays more readily and comprehensively.

Specific to this NPRM, AWO seeks an explanation of what changed from CSX's remote operation request in June 2025, which the Coast Guard denied because "CSX did not provide sufficient information to evaluate whether operating these drawbridges from a remote location would provide an equivalent level of safety...as provided by an onsite bridge tender," to its request in December 2025, which the Coast Guard determined was sufficient to approve a temporary deviation and is now proposing to permanently approve. This information is important to understand how CSX will maintain safe operations in light of historical incidents and help inform industry comments on potential future rulemakings. If the District conducted a risk-based review of historical incidents at these bridges in reaching its determination, AWO requests that the basis for that determination be made public.

Further, to provide meaningful oversight of remote bridge operations, AWO urges the Coast Guard to use its existing authorities to investigate the unsafe operation of movable bridges, regardless of how they are operated, and instances of repeated unreasonable delays to vessel traffic. The goal of this increased transparency, investigation, and potential enforcement is not to provide more information that industry can use to oppose remote bridge operations, to have more civil penalties issued without justification, or to have bridge owners unreasonably burdened or penalized. The Coast Guard has the authority and the responsibility to hold operators of both vessels and movable bridges that cross navigable waterways accountable when noncompliant or unsafe operations create navigation hazards, disrupt maritime commerce, and jeopardize waterways safety.

Need for Robust and Consistent Public Notice and Comment Process

AWO is concerned that the test of the remote operations systems of the five bridges named in the NPRM was authorized and conducted without any Federal Register notice or formal opportunity for public comment. The only public notification prior to the NPRM came through Sector Mobile's MSIB 71-26, a non-regulatory advisory, and local media. This departs from how the Coast Guard, including the Heartland District, has handled comparable remote operation tests:

- **San Bernard River and Old Brazos River, Texas (2026).** On February 6, 2026, the Heartland District published test deviations with requests for comments allowing Union Pacific Railroad to remotely operate both drawbridges (91 FR 5316, Docket No. USCG-2025-0070; 91 FR 5317, Docket No. USCG-2025-0309). Neither test changed the bridges' opening schedules; both concerned only remote operation.

- **Lehigh Valley Drawbridge, Newark Bay, New Jersey (2025).** The Northeast District published a test deviation with a request for comments for remote operation of the Conrail drawbridge (90 FR 51508, Docket No. USCG-2025-0805), even though the notice stated the bridge's operating schedule would not change.

- **Bay St. Louis and Pascagoula River, Mississippi (2022).** When CSX previously sought remote operation of two of the same bridges included in the current test, the Coast Guard published NPRMs in August 2022 and test deviations with requests for comments in September 2022.

These precedents demonstrate that notice and comment produce better outcomes. Following AWO's comments on the Texas test deviations, the Coast Guard proposed requiring that each bridge be left in the open-to-navigation position if remote monitoring systems fail, if the remote operations site is evacuated, or if the railroad fails to meet applicable safety and security requirements. While we recognize that this notice now provides an opportunity for comment on the permanent change of the named bridges' operating procedures, the process followed differs from the process followed historically. While 33 CFR §117.35 allows temporary deviations to be approved without a notice and comment process, AWO asks the Coast Guard to explain the procedural basis for conducting the current test without a Federal Register notice and whether its process has recently changed. AWO appreciates the opportunity to provide comments and is interested in understanding the reason for the change.

Summary of Recommendations

In closing, AWO respectfully reiterates the following recommendations to the Coast Guard:

To the Heartland District:

- Pause this rulemaking and additional remote bridge operation proposals within the Heartland District until bridge owners demonstrate safe and reliable remote operation and the concerns raised in these comments regarding Coast Guard oversight are addressed.

- Should the Coast Guard proceed with a final rule: (1) require safeguards against premature closure in regulatory text; (2) require AIS systems on the bridges included in this rulemaking and at their remote operation centers; and, (3) retain the open-to-navigation requirement and clarify that it applies to the failure or degradation of any critical remote system component, including camera visibility, communications, and AIS.

- Require bridge owners to demonstrate, through test-period data on openings, delays, communications, and system failures, that remote operation provides service equivalent to an on-site tender, and publish or summarize this data in the notice of proposed rulemaking.

- For each bridge for which remote operation authorization is requested, disclose information provided in the application package, prior incident records, and any corrective or enforcement actions taken in response to mariner complaints associated with the bridge in each rulemaking docket. We appreciate that this notice outlined the 2022 incident and the agency's prior decisions on CSX's remote operation requests, and we encourage this practice in future notices.

- Explain what changed between CSX's June 2025 and December 2025 requests that supported the Coast Guard's proposed approval of remote operation, and make public the basis for that determination, including any risk-based review of historical incidents.

- Use existing authorities to investigate unsafe bridge operations and repeated unreasonable delays.

- Explain the procedural basis for conducting the remote operation test without a Federal Register notice.

To Coast Guard headquarters:

- Convene a national stakeholder group of vessel operators, bridge owners, and other appropriate federal agencies and stakeholders to review historical casualties and delays at movable bridges and develop: (1) consistent safeguards for movable bridge operations that prevent unnecessary delays and premature bridge closures; (2) a national reporting process for operational issues at moveable bridges; and, (3) an effective oversight regime for movable bridge operations.

Where public disclosure of the requested information is restricted, AWO requests that the Coast Guard explain the basis for the restriction and provide it in aggregate or summary form in the potential final rule. AWO also requests that the Coast Guard identify any statutory limitations on implementing these recommendations in the potential final rule.

AWO appreciates the opportunity to provide comments on USCG-2026-0889. Our members operate on the waterways that these bridges cross every day and have a direct interest in ensuring that any transition to remote operation is safe, reliable, and transparent.

Please do not hesitate to contact us if you have questions or if we can be of further assistance.

Respectfully,



Jill Bessetti
Southern Region – Vice President
The American Waterways Operators

Enclosure (1) AWO's 2022 comment letters on USCG-2022-0298 (Pascagoula River) and USCG-2022-0299 (Bay St. Louis)
Enclosure (2) GICA's 2022 comment letters on USCG-2022-0298 (Pascagoula River) and USCG-2022-0299 (Bay St. Louis)
Enclosure (3) USCG Sector Mobile FOC 012-23
CC:
Captain Todd DeVries, Director of Western Rivers, U.S. Coast Guard Heartland District

Mr. Michael D. Emerson, Director, Marine Transportation Systems Management (CG-5PW), U.S. Coast Guard Headquarters

Enclosure (1) AWO's 2022 comment letters on USCG-2022-0298 (Pascagoula River) and USCG-2022-0299 (Bay St. Louis)

The American Waterways Operators

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Mark A. Wright
Vice President – Southern Region

November 7, 2022

Mr. Douglas Blakemore
Chief, Bridge Administration Branch
U.S. Coast Guard, Eighth Coast Guard District
Hale Boggs Federal Building
500 Poydras Street
New Orleans, LA 70130-3310

Re: Drawbridge Operation Regulation; Bay St. Louis, Bay St. Louis, MS
(Docket No. USCG-2022-0299)

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. Our industry is the largest segment of the nation's 40,000-vessel domestic maritime fleet and moves 665 million tons of cargo each year safely and efficiently. On behalf of AWO's more than 300 member companies, we appreciate the opportunity to comment on the Coast Guard's issuance of the temporary deviation for how the CSX Transportation railroad drawbridge operates across Bay St. Louis.

In the notification of temporary deviation, CSX Transportation requests to operate this bridge remotely from their railroad terminal in Mobile, Alabama. AWO members have expressed safety concerns. While AWO members understand the value of technological enhancement, recent incidents have suggested that the remote operations merit greater scrutiny. There have been at least three allisions involving towing vessels and remotely operated bridges in the last year. AWO understands that all three may have involved some remote operation errors. We believe it is imperative that the U.S. Coast Guard fully investigate each incident and determine whether protocols should be developed to ensure greater risk mitigation for mariner safety before any deviation for remote operations is granted.

Our industry is concerned about the safety, environmental, and economic impacts of an increased number of remote-controlled bridge operations on U.S. navigable waterways. Since one of the Coast Guard's missions is to facilitate commerce, we believe the agency is in the best position to monitor and oversee remote-controlled operations to minimize the risk to

mariners, vessels, and commodities that move on the water. AWO requests that the Coast Guard start by developing a process to monitor these operations, inform stakeholders of the safety risks, and regulate bridge operations to minimize the risk to safe operation of vessels on navigable waterways.

Thank you again for the opportunity to comment. We look forward to continued engagement on this important navigation safety issue.

Sincerely,



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Chief, Bridge Administration Branch
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New Orleans, LA 70130-3310

Re: Drawbridge Operation Regulation;
Pascagoula River, Pascagoula, MS
(Docket No. USCG-2022-0298)

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In the notification of temporary deviation, CSX Transportation requests to operate this bridge remotely from their railroad terminal in Mobile, Alabama. AWO members have expressed safety concerns. While AWO members understand the value of technological enhancement, recent incidents have suggested that the remote operations merit greater scrutiny. There have been at least three allisions involving towing vessels and remotely operated bridges in the last year. AWO understands that all three may have involved some remote operation errors. We believe it is imperative that the U.S. Coast Guard fully investigate each incident and determine whether protocols should be developed to ensure greater risk mitigation for mariner safety before any deviation for remote operations is granted.

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Thank you again for the opportunity to comment. We look forward to continued engagement on this important navigation safety issue.

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Enclosure (2) GICA's 2022 comment letters on USCG-2022-0298 (Pascagoula River) and USCG-2022-0299 (Bay St. Louis)

Gulf Intracoastal Canal Association
PO Box 2698
Covington, LA 70434
www.gicaonline.com · 985-302-6666

November 7, 2022

Mr. Douglas Blakemore -Chief, Bridge Administration Branch
U.S. Coast Guard, Eighth Coast Guard District
Hale Boggs Federal Building
500 Poydras Street
New Orleans, LA 70130-3310

Subj: Re: Docket No. USCG-2022-0298

The Gulf Intracoastal Canal Association (GICA) is a 117-year-old trade association representing over 160 member companies involved in inland towing and barge transportation, shipping, shipyards, port operations and related maritime industries which use the 1200 miles of Gulf Intracoastal Waterway (GIWW) between Brownsville, Texas and St. Marks, Florida. GICA is committed to facilitating commerce by ensuring safe, reliable, and efficient Gulf Coast waterways.

This letter is in response to Drawbridge Operation Regulation; Pascagoula River, Pascagoula, MS (Docket No. USCG-2022-0298) regarding a proposal to initiate a temporary deviation to the existing bridge operating regulations to support remote bridge operations. Several recent casualties involving inland towing vessels and remotely operated bridges over the past year on various waterways throughout the Eighth U.S. Coast Guard District have been reported and are very disconcerting.

GICA does not support any temporary deviation to the existing bridge operating regulations to support remote bridge operations until a detailed root cause analysis is conducted of each of the aforementioned casualties. The root cause analysis is needed to determine if systemic issues exist regarding remotely operated bridges which need to be addressed prior to authorizing any subsequent temporary deviations.

Thank you for your consideration. GICA looks forward to working with you and your staff in the years to come to facilitate commerce through ensuring safe, reliable and efficient Gulf coast waterways.

Sincerely

Paul Dittman
President
Gulf Intracoastal Canal Association

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November 7, 2022

Mr. Douglas Blakemore -Chief, Bridge Administration Branch
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Thank you for your consideration. GICA looks forward to working with you and your staff in the years to come to facilitate commerce through ensuring safe, reliable and efficient Gulf coast waterways.

Sincerely

Paul Dittman
President
Gulf Intracoastal Canal Association

Enclosure (3) USCG Sector Mobile FOC 012-23

UNITED STATES COAST GUARD
U.S. Department of Homeland Security

FINDINGS OF CONCERN

Sector Mobile

April 19, 2023
Mobile, Alabama

Findings of Concern 012-23

REMOTE BRIDGE TENDER OPERATIONS

Purpose. The U.S. Coast Guard issues findings of concern to disseminate information related to unsafe conditions that were identified as causal factors in a casualty and could contribute to future incidents. Findings of concern are intended to educate the public, state, or local agencies about the conditions discovered so they may address findings with an appropriate voluntary action or highlight existing applicable company policies or state/local regulations.

The Incident. Recently, an inspected towing vessel (ITV) and its 7-barge tow allided with a remotely operated railroad bridge. The bridge tender/operator was not physically located at the bridge, but rather at another location equipped with monitoring and control equipment including a satellite video link of the bridge. The freeboard of the ITV's tow varied among the barges.

On approach to the bridge, the ITV made arrangements with the bridge tender via VHF radio. The tender remotely opened the bridge and the ITV proceeded to navigate through the fully opened bridge. The tender then lost video feed of the ITV approaching the bridge while simultaneously noticing an approaching train via the bridge control console. The train received the correct signals for an open bridge and therefore began to slow and stop. Meanwhile, the lead barge had already tripped the first and second set of vessel sensors on the bridge.

When the subsequent barges with lower freeboard began passing through, the first set of sensors became clear and indicated no vessel; however, the second set of sensors still indicated the higher-freeboard lead barge was passing. Despite seeing that some of the bridge's vessel sensors were still tripped to indicate the presence of a vessel under the bridge, the tender decided to manually override the bridge's safety sensors and close the bridge while the ITV was passing through. The bridge closed on the ITV resulting in damage to the ITV and its barges to break free.

Contributing Factors and Analysis. The investigation identified poor judgement and lack of situational awareness and communication on the part of the tender controlling the railroad bridge. The tender saw the approaching train and then manually began closing the bridge without verifying the absence of vessel traffic under the bridge and without communicating the bridge closure to the ITV. During the closing of the bridge, the tender did not have the bridge video feed available and the first set of bridge sensors were not activated due to the low freeboard of the barges behind the lead barge.

Findings of Concern. Coast Guard investigators have identified the following measures to mitigate the risks associated with the above identified contributing factors.

April 19, 2023
Mobile, Alabama

- Owners/operators of remotely operated bridges should require that all video feeds, if so equipped, be fully functional and that bridge tenders must not operate the bridge in the event of an outage of a video feed.

- Owners/operators of remotely operated bridges should consider installing Automatic Identification System (AIS) functionality to remotely operated bridge work sites for increased situational awareness. If the bridge is in a remote area of the country where is no reception, consider installing an AIS receiver on the bridge. Additionally, training on the use of AIS should be provided to bridge tenders.

- Owners/operators of remotely operated bridges should consider providing training and awareness to bridge tenders of remotely operated bridges regarding the height of bridge sensors and that certain vessels, such as a loaded barge, may be lower than the sensor.

Closing. These findings of concern are provided for informational purpose only and do not relieve any domestic or international safety, operational, or material requirements. For any questions or comments please contact Sector Mobile Investigations Division by phone at (251) 441-5763 or by email at secmobile-investigations@uscg.mil.