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December 22, 2025

Mr. Gregory P. Hitchen
Supervisory Bridge Management Specialist
Northeast Coast Guard District
One South Street, Battery Park Building
New York, NY 10004

Re: Drawbridge Operation
Regulation; Passaic River,
Between the City of Newark and
Town of Kearny, NJ (USCG-2025-
0999)

Dear Mr. Hitchen:

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.

On behalf of our more than 300 member companies, we appreciate the opportunity to comment on the U.S. Coast Guard's proposal to change the operating regulations for the Point-No-Point Railroad Bridge on the Passaic River to allow for remote operation.¹

This proposal is not expected to have a direct effect on towing vessel operators. Industrial activity along the Passaic River has largely declined in recent years, while energy terminals that previously served as frequent destinations for tugs and barges have either closed or relocated. These changes are primarily attributable to economic challenges associated with bridge infrastructure and evolving patterns of land use.

¹ The Point-No-Point Railroad Bridge on the Passaic River is governed by [33 CFR 117.739\(c\)](https://www.ecfr.gov/lookup/section?edition=2020-07-01&part=117.739&subpart=1).

However, AWO members have expressed serious safety concerns regarding the remote operation of movable bridges over navigable waterways. Members report an alarming number of allisions and near-miss events involving remotely operated bridges closing on vessels with little or no effective warning. Each near miss carries the potential for significant property damage, environmental harm, and loss of life. These concerns are underscored by a serious marine incident in 2022, when the CSX Railroad bridge across the Mobile River at mile 13.32 closed on a towing vessel that was 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 takes bridge allisions very seriously and has worked with the Coast Guard for more than 30 years through our Quality Safety Partnership to minimize the risk of allisions. We urge the Coast Guard to work with our industry, bridge owners and operators, and other stakeholders as appropriate to establish safety standards for remote-controlled bridge operations on U.S. navigable waterways. Given the Coast Guard's dual mandate to facilitate commerce and ensure maritime safety, we also urge the agency to fully investigate each incident involving remote bridge operations and determine how to best minimize risk to mariners and vessels before authorizing additional remote operations. The growing number of incidents and near misses underscores the need for comprehensive safety protocols and operational guidelines before expanding remote bridge operation.

Thank you for the opportunity to comment on USCG-2025-0999. AWO would be happy to answer any questions or provide additional information as needed.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Brian W. Vahey". The signature is fluid and cursive, with "Brian" and "Vahey" being more distinct and "W." being smaller.

Brian Vahey
Vice President – Atlantic Region