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Coast Guard Service Cuts Dangerous, Marine Communicators Say

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A CAW delegation representing 350 Marine Communications and Traffic Service officers from across Canada will outline the dangers to marine safety from Coast Guard service cutbacks at Canadian Marine Advisory Council meetings starting November 6.

CMAC, which runs November 6 to 8 at 'Old City Hall' in Ottawa located at 111 Sussex Drive, is a forum mandated by legislation to consult on issues related to maritime safety in Canada. More than 550 delegates including ship owners, ship officers, crew union representatives, as well as government representatives will be on hand to discuss various maritime related issues.

On May 17, 2012 The Canadian Coast Guard informed 184 MCTS Officers working at 10 centres across Canada that their centre was closing. These centres are located in St. John's and St. Anthony, NL, Saint John, N.B., Rivière au Renard and Montréal, QC, Thunder Bay, ON, Vancouver, Tofino and Comox, BC. This is in addition to Inuvik, NWT closing at the end of 2012.

Chad Stroud, president of CAW Local 2182, which represents the communications officers, said "this drastic reduction of essential services was done to save money, not to save lives. The reduction in MCTS centres will result in a decreased ability to hear that critical 'mayday.' It's hard to hear when no one's there," Stroud said.

The CAW delegation to CMAC will include affected employees. They will outline their concerns regarding the pending cuts and also circulate a petition to be presented in the House of Commons calling on government to reverse its decision on cuts scheduled for 2014-15. The petition will also be available online.

The new Coast Guard plan is to provide service from a distance, said Stroud. For example: Vancouver, which is the busiest port in the country, will now have their marine communications and traffic services provided from Victoria, BC.

"This approach may work well for air traffic control, however, with marine traffic, it is different," Stroud said. "Local knowledge is most important, knowing about currents, tides, local users and geography is critical when providing assistance to mariners and regulating marine traffic," he said.

"Prime Minister Stephen Harper's cost cutting agenda represents a total disregard for marine safety," Stroud added. "After cutting important rescue coordination service in St. John's, NL and later this fall similar cuts planned for rescue coordination in Quebec City, "government has turned its axe on important MCTS centres that play a significant role in the Search and Rescue and other safety infrastructure of this country", said Stroud.

Another important feature of the Harper cuts is the serious lack of analysis and consultation with maritime community stakeholders across Canada. Even CMAC, which has legislative responsibility to deal with matters of maritime safety, has been void of any consultation around the pending cuts to Coast Guard safety services in Canada. This anomaly is not lost on the delegation attending CMAC in Ottawa.

"We will take that message to senior Transport Canada officials who are mandated to administer the CMAC process," Stroud said.

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