

# Coast guard goes high-tech

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## Communications system worth \$50m has been installed in Halifax, N.L.

The Canadian Coast Guard's new \$50-million communications system has been installed in Halifax after five years of development.

It is a massive project that the coast guard is saying will be revolutionary. It has also been tied to controversy because the system was cited as a justification for cutting almost half of the regional communications centres across Canada.

In recent weeks, the new system was installed in Halifax and Placentia, N.L.

"The reports about it are fabulous," said new Canadian Coast Guard commissioner Jody Thomas.

"The increased capacity of this software is life-changing for our operators in terms of its ease of use, the information they have access to, their ability to respond and monitor traffic."

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The coast guard is spending \$53.4 million to replace its communications, marine broadcast and navigational telex data systems.

Aside from increased ability to communicate and monitor marine travel, Thomas said the upgrade will significantly free up manpower.

As an example, staff would previously spend hours every day reading out weather reports for broadcast. Those can now be inputted into a computer and converted using text-to-voice software in minutes.

Thomas compares it to upgrading from a dial-up phone to a smartphone in one massive leap.

The coast guard says the new system will significantly increase its abilities. But, at the same time, it is taking heat for cutting its regional communications centres to 12 from 22.

Unions that represent coast guard employees have warned that the closures will mean a drop in service and possibly safety in remote areas.

But Thomas argued that the switch to the new communications system is a net benefit.

"Being in multiple locations doesn't necessarily enhance the service," she said.

"We have improved the software, we've improved the systems they're using. But the towers that receive the information, the radio towers that collect the information and send it to the stations, that's unchanged."

The system upgrade will be completed over the next year, with a break in the summer for high shipping season.

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