

# Consolidation of Coast Guard broadcast centres in final stages

**Project is behind schedule, but on budget, says official**

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The marine communications and traffic services centre in St. Anthony is slated to close at the end of the summer as part of a modernization program by the Canadian Coast Guard. (CBC)

The process of modernizing and consolidating Coast Guard marine communications and traffic services centres in Newfoundland and Labrador is now in the final stages, with centres in St. John's and St. Anthony expected to close in the coming weeks and months.

Barring any unforeseen circumstances, the process of phasing out the centre in St. John's should be completed within the next couple of weeks, while St. Anthony will close by the end of the summer, said Wade Spurrell, an assistant commissioner for the Atlantic region with the Canadian Coast Guard

That will leave three centres, located in Placentia, Port aux Basques and Happy Valley-Goose Bay, to broadcast safety information such as weather and navigational warnings, regulate traffic movement and monitor distress and safety calls.

It's all part of an ambitious and controversial decision by the federal government to reduce the number of MCTS centres across Canada from 22 to 12, and replace technology that dates back to the 1980s.

The project has been delayed because of technical challenges, but Spurrell said it remains on budget at a cost of roughly \$64 million.

He estimates the new system will save Canadian taxpayers about \$5 million annually, while continuing to provide first-rate services to mariners.

"We're very confident we'll be able to do it in such a way that the user should see little or no impact whatsoever," he said of the transition to the new system.

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There have been plenty of questions about the new system's effectiveness and costs, but Spurrell expressed confidence that the new technology will allow the Coast Guard to provide the same level of service, with fewer resources.

He said new text to voice technology will eliminate the need for MCTS operators to read the marine broadcast, freeing them up for other duties.

Staffing levels will change. For example, there are currently two operators on station in both St. John's and Placentia. Following consolidation, there will be three operators on duty in Placentia.

## **Positive feedback from other regions**

Spurrell said there have been glitches along the way, which contributed to the delay.

"We've been clear from the start that we wouldn't be switching over until we were very confident in the new system," he said.

He said the new system has received positive feedback in other regions of Canada where it is already up and running.

"Operators are seeing the advantages of this new technology," he said.

While there will be fewer MCTS centres, they will be better interconnected, and the number of radio towers and radar installations across the country will remain unchanged.

"It is a significant leap ahead from the 80s to modern communications systems," Spurrell noted.

*With files from Jamie Baker*