

BUSINESS
VANCOUVER

Ucluelet Coast Guard station closure will erode coastal safety: union (updated)

April 21, 2015, 10:04 a.m.

 Environment & Sustainability
(/sections/environment-sustainability/)

By Jen St. Denis

The union that represents Coast Guard officers is sounding the alarm over the closure of a three ship traffic monitoring stations today, including one in Ucluelet.

The federal government's strategy of closing Coast Guard bases to save money has been under fire following a 2,700 litre bunker fuel spill in English Bay on April 8. Critics such as [Fred Moxey, a retired Coast Guard captain](#) (<http://www.nsnews.com/news/west-vancouver-beaches-remain-closed-after-oil-spill-1.1823706>), have said the now-shuttered Kitsilano Coast Guard station would have responded quicker to the spill.

"The fuel spill in Vancouver's harbour this month was within sight of a closed coast guard station," Chad Stroud, president of Unifor Local 2182, the union representing coast guard communication officers, in a release. "Fewer officers means reduced capacity to monitor traffic, distress communication, and coastal communities are more vulnerable."

Vancouver's marine communications and traffic centre [is also slated to close on May 6](#) (<http://www.biv.com/article/2015/4/marine-communications-hub-closure-amps-vancouver-p/>), and the Comox station will close sometime next winter or spring, said Scott Hodge, a spokesperson for Unifor Local 2182. Vancouver traffic will be monitored via radar from Victoria, while Ucluelet will be monitored from a communications centre in Prince Rupert.

Coast guard communications officers are particularly concerned about the Vancouver closure, which will leave B.C.'s busiest location in terms of ship traffic without visual checks.

"It's like having a control tower at an airport and not being able to look out the windows," said Hodge.

He recalled an incident where a pleasure craft had come close to a cruise ship in order to take photos. The cruise ship started its engines, creating a suction effect that was pulling the smaller boat into the engines. The Coast Guard communications staff observed the incident and was able to warn the cruise ship over the radio, Hodge said.

The Ucluelet, Comox and Vancouver closures also concern Hodge because with only the Victoria centre left, an outage could leave the entire south coast without communication capabilities.

"It's a chain link from the bottom end of Vancouver Island to Prince Rupert. If one piece goes out, you could lose everything from there. It is possible to have an outage that stretches from the Washington [state] border to Alaska," Hodge said.

"Right now you've got five centres, and if one goes out you've got overlap between centres."

He also anticipates the centre in Victoria will be a "madhouse," and that with fewer staff monitoring all radio communication, it could be difficult at times to catch garbled distress calls or one-time Maydays.

Gregory Lick, director general of operations for the Canadian Coast Guard, told *Business in Vancouver* that the updated communications system makes it possible to monitor ship traffic from any location. The consolidation is expected to save \$5.4 million a year. The government has spent \$64 million upgrading the system in preparation for the consolidation.

Allan Hughes, western regional director for Unifor Local 2182, said that over 500,000 vessel movements occur on B.C.'s coast every year.

With files from the North Shore News

jstdenis@biv.com

@jensteden

[0 Comments \(http://www.biv.com/article/2015/4/ucluelet-coast-guard-base-closure-will-erode-coast/#disqus_thread\)](http://www.biv.com/article/2015/4/ucluelet-coast-guard-base-closure-will-erode-coast/#disqus_thread) on this topic. [Join the discussion.](#) ()

