

Union says Coast Guard move puts mariners at risk

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Reductions in staffing at Canadian Coast Guard communication stations could put mariners at risk, CAW representatives say.

CAW president Ken Lewenza spoke recently against measures to cut overtime hours for Marine Communications and Traffic Services (MCTS) employees. A news release from CAW -- the union representing MCTS workers -- called the reduction "a reckless cost-cutting measure that puts lives at risk."

The federal government defended the policies, saying they reduce overtime workloads for staff and make communication stations run more efficiently.

The service at communication centres -- in charge of receiving distress calls and regulating maritime traffic -- will be cut during the off-peak season at 11 of 22 stations Canadawide, the CAW said.

Sarnia is home to the Coast Guard's Central and Arctic Region headquarters. The local MCTS centre monitors Great Lakes communications from the Toronto area west to Lake Superior and north to the Arctic.

New overtime policies will effectively reduce the number of employees on shift from January to May at the Sarnia station from five to three, said Local 2182 president Martin Gregoire.

"We feel that having less employees on staff means those remaining employees will busier, and won't be able to pay full attention to those distress signals," said Gregoire.

Minister of Fisheries and Oceans Keith Ashfield denied the CAW accusation that service would suffer. The ministry would not implement any policies that would put lives at risk, Ashfield said.

"Like any responsible organization, we must ensure that we use our resources wisely," Ashfield said in an email. "Canadians do not want to be paying for unnecessary or unproductive overtime."

Sarnia-Lambton MP Pat Davidson said no jobs will be lost as the reduction only applies to overtime.

"What we're trying to do is put things in place that are going to make things operate smoothly, but are going to help us reach some of our goals economically," Davidson said. "Mariners are going to continue to get the same level of service they've always been getting."

But Gregoire believes less staff will certainly result in diminished service. MCTS is part of the Canadian safety net for mariners, and the net is being trimmed, he said.

Gregoire agrees that overtime hours must be reduced for Local 2182 workers. He says the union has been asking for cutbacks on overtime for years, but hoped this would mean hiring more workers.

The Coast Guard conducted a workload study and risk assessment before implementing the new measures. CAW representatives were consulted but are unhappy with the result, Gregoire said.

"We agree that employees work too much overtime, however we disagree on what needs to be done," he said.

The new policies were rolled out on a 'dry run' beginning in January at the 11 affected stations.

Davidson said the Victoria, B.C. station has successfully run with similar staffing for years.

But an incident at the Prince Rupert station in January shows the potential dangers of the new policies, Gregoire said. A distress call was missed at a Prince Rupert station under reduced hours. But the ship was in a "double coverage" area, so the call was picked up by a neighbouring station.

"Had the vessel been somewhere else, there could have been loss of life," he said.

dpunch@theobserver.ca

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