

Cuts to Marine Communications Services Pose Major Safety Threat to Fishery Workers

May 23, 2012

(Toronto) -- The union representing fishery workers in Newfoundland and Labrador and British Columbia is raising grave concerns about the safety of workers on the east and the west coasts of the country, in light of the cuts to Marine Communications and Traffic Services Centres.

On May 17, 184 marine communications and traffic services officers working at 10 marine communications and traffic services centres were informed the centres would be closing.

"The marine communication centres in St. John's and St. Anthony are important lifelines for fish harvesters at sea," said FFAW/CAW President Earle McCurdy. The Fish, Food and Allied Workers (FFAW/CAW) represents 15,000 working women and men throughout Newfoundland and Labrador, most of whom are employed in the fishing industry.

"The staff at these centres is the first point of contact for mariners, and they know the people as well as the local marine environment," said McCurdy.

"These closures on top of the previously announced closure of the St. John's Rescue Sub-station are a backward step, at a time when the fatality rates in the east coast fishery clearly point to the need for greater safety infrastructure. Not for one minute do we buy the bland assurances of the federal government that safety at sea will not be compromised by these cutbacks," said McCurdy.

The closures, to be phased in 2014 and 2015, will take place in St-John's and St-Anthony, NL, St-John, N.B., Rivière au Renard and Montréal, QC, Thunder Bay, ON, Vancouver, Tofino and Comox, B.C., some of the busiest marine areas. This is in addition to Inuvik, NWT closing at the end of 2012.

The closure of Coastguard stations will only delay and hamper response times, when minutes can mean life or death, said UFAWU-CAW Safety Director Darrell Enger.

The United Fishermen and Allied Workers' Union-CAW (UFAWU-CAW) represent fishermen in crab, prawns, seine, gillnet, troll, trawl, black cod, & longline on the West Coast.

"Moving a response centre from Kitsilano, an area that hosts the largest shipping and recreational fleets on the West Coast of Canada, is dangerous and will cost lives," Enger said.

"In my 40 plus years fishing here on the BC coast, I have found that Vessel Traffic Systems and Coastguard radio operators with local knowledge of the area are so valuable for responses from other marine traffic or Search and Research in emergency situations," Enger said.

The small amount of money the government expects to save has put a value on what a person's life is worth or not worth, he said.

These cuts announced May 17 follow the staff reductions announced earlier this year and the closures of the two Marine Rescue Centres in St. John's, Newfoundland and Quebec City.

"The federal government's cost cutting agenda includes a total disregard for marine safety, said CAW Local 2182 President Martin Grégoire, representing Canadian Coast Guard Marine Communications Officers.

"We are calling on the mariners and users of our services to write to the Coast Guard Commissioner, to maintain the present number of communications and traffic services centres," said Grégoire.

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