

# Deep Water Port *notes*

The News Portfolio of The Connecticut Deep Water Port Community

*New London . New Haven . Bridgeport*

## Maritime Matters in Washington

By Mr. Paul Bea



*The vessel Connecticut Pilot underway in Long Island Sound. State Marine Pilots use this privately owned vessel to board commercial ships at sea. Marine Pilots assist the ships master in safe transit to and from Connecticut and New York ports.*

IN LAST MONTH'S ISSUE I offered a teaser as to three developments "worth a quick mention and watchful eye." Here's some detail on two of those.

**"Congress is on the verge of approving FY 2013 funding by the start of the fiscal year on October 1."** And they are doing just that. House and Senate leadership had concluded in late July that it would do no one any good, least of all their respective parties in the re-election season, if Washington were again the scene of partisan wrangling over how to keep government operating. So with little drama the House approved a 6-month Continuing Resolution (CR) on September 13. As of this writing the Senate will take up the funding bill and the White House will sign it. According to the CR virtually all discretionary program funding is being kept at prior year levels, plus 0.612 percent. With half-year funding the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers is expected to do as it has under previous CRs and give priority to projects whose dredging requirements will need to be met in the first half of the fiscal year.

In passing a longer-than-usual short term funding bill Congress is saving up for the more difficult and contentious decisions associated with the well publicized December 31 "fiscal cliff" that looms not far in the distance. (It is a congressionally constructed cliff—a Plan B—that resulted from them not agreeing in 2011 on a specific strategy to reduce the deficit by \$1.5 trillion over ten years.) If a major deal in Congress, agreeable to the White House, isn't approved in the last "lame duck" months after the election the so-called Bush tax cut will expire and a \$1.2 trillion automatic across-the-board cut—otherwise known as sequestration—will be made in all non-entitlement government spending, half of it in defense budget.

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Sequestration will mean 8.2 percent shaved off of every non-defense discretionary spending program, including individual USACE civil works projects, and 9.4 percent from defense related programs and projects, including the U.S.-flag Maritime Security Program. This complicates the task for Federal agencies in allocating funds in the next months because regardless of current level funding in the CR they will have to finish the next fiscal year with cuts approaching 1/10<sup>th</sup> of their budgets. Again, that assumes that in the coming months Congress will not arrive at a different deal with selective cuts in spending and/or hikes in revenue.

**“A July announcement told of a new Federal interagency Task Force on Ports. For starters expect interagency coordination on port related project funding<sup>2</sup>.”** The example I gave was previously approved funding for both the Port of Miami’s deepening and its intermodal rail infrastructure project. (In that same press release the White House made the first of its “We Can’t Wait” regulatory speed-up announcements, listing seven projects in five ports—Miami, Jacksonville, Savannah, Charleston and NY/NJ—that would benefit by expedited process reviews.) The significance of this new task force remains to be seen. That it is coordinated at the White House tends to scare folks on Capitol Hill, where they don’t always agree with presidential priorities, and among those who think the environmental agenda controls too many things in the White House. Second, as the inland waterway sector has commented, what was originally going to be a “Navigation Task Force” is now that a more specific Task Force on Ports. The industry that is reliant on an outmoded inland

locks system and drought-affected waterways sees the coastal orientation of the White House initiative as excluding a sector in need.

If the current administration is given another four-year life we will get to see what this interagency task force and increasing White House attention to American ports will mean. In the meantime we can make a general observation that in the last four years ports have been the subject of more favorable attention in Washington—including previously unheard levels of infrastructure funding—than has been the case in preceding decades.

*Paul Bea is a government relations and policy advisor in Washington, DC. He chairs the marine highway advocacy group, The Coastwise Coalition, and discusses marine transportation system matters at www.MTSMatters.com.*

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