



**Homeland
Security**

U.S. COAST GUARD

Sector Upper

Mississippi River



Marine Safety Information Bulletin #02-08

Increased Incidence and the Threat Posed by Barge Breakaways

May 2, 2008

In the past week, there have been 3 reported incidents of breakaway barges in the Upper Mississippi River Captain of the Port zone. Within this zone, breakaways by themselves and in combination with other marine casualties constitute the greatest and most likely threat to life, property, commerce, and the marine environment. During my tenure as Commander of Sector Upper Mississippi River, breakaways have resulted in significant property damage as well as the closure of locks, bridges, and waterways. I take this threat very seriously.

All fleet and towing operators must likewise take this threat just as seriously and must take all means to ensure that the barges under their control are safely and securely maintained for the expected weather, current, and traffic conditions. High water, poorly maintained equipment, and the surge from reasonably expected traffic in the area are not excusable causes for barge breakaway incidents.

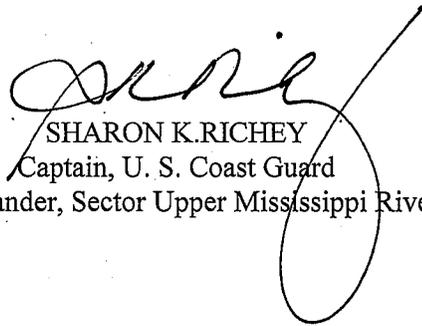
For the Coast Guard's part, we have conducted an analysis of historical trends which indicates an increase in barge breakaways and other casualties during periods of high water and current flow. Additionally, the lock closures in the area have exacerbated the situation due to the increased volume of barges staged within fleeting areas. To mitigate risks associated with these conditions such as these, we have jointly developed our Waterways Action Plan (WAP) with industry. This plan serves as a solid basis for communication and action but it has not eliminated the threat posed by these incidents. Therefore I have instructed my staff to recommend measures to more completely address the threat of these incidents in the future. As a result, I am implementing their recommendations for a 4 point plan as follows:

1. Education – It is critical that all involved parties fully understand their roles and obligations in preventing marine casualties, the importance of immediate communications during an incident, and the need to work together to resolve situations in a safe, expeditious manner. These obligations take many forms and include statutory requirements, contractual obligations, interagency agreements, and good marine practices. We will prepare educational materials regarding history, best practices, and responsibilities for distribution to industry and other interested parties.
2. Partnership – A safe marine environment is a joint effort. Continued emphasis on joint planning such as the WAP is essential. In addition, there has been extensive value gained through the information exchange of information through joint industry-government partnerships such as RIAC, IRCA, and the Missouri River Navigators. I intend to extend our outreach efforts to become more encompassing of barge fleeting operations throughout the Sector Upper Mississippi River AOR. To do this, I will conduct periodic fleeting operation meetings throughout the AOR.

and will explore, with industry, whether the creation of a Fleeting Operations Group would be an appropriate long term forum.

3. Incident Review Process – I directed my staff to establish a forum for a periodic, joint review of casualties within our area of operations. During these sessions, the Coast Guard, Industry, Army Corps of Engineers, and other interested parties will be invited to discuss, with impunity, marine casualties and response actions. The purpose of these discussions will be for the exchange of lessons learned so that all parties can benefit.
4. Enforcement – Finally, where necessary, we will increase enforcement for violations which lead to or cause the escalation of an incident. Under our statutory obligation, we will continue to investigate the cause of all marine casualties with the intent of promoting marine safety. Where it is evident that negligent operations are the cause of an incident or the failure to communicate in a timely manner delays a response or creates a hazard by decreasing the situational awareness of others, it is only appropriate to hold those responsible accountable for their actions. Failing to do so sets a poor precedent and is a disservice to the majority of the maritime community who are taking appropriate measures to ensure continued safety in the marine environment.

I look forward to maintaining the open lines of communication between the U. S. Coast Guard and industry in the Upper Mississippi area. If you have questions or concerns regarding this or any other matter effecting marine safety, please do not hesitate to contact either me or my Chief of Prevention, Lieutenant Commander Timothy Whalen at (314)269-2568.



SHARON K. RICHEY
Captain, U. S. Coast Guard
Commander, Sector Upper Mississippi River