

Seapower

Papp: Growing Risks in Arctic Demand Coast Guard's Attention

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WASHINGTON - The U.S. Coast Guard will send the National Security Cutter (NSC) *Waesche* to the Arctic this summer to assist with missions in the region, but that will take away from other areas of other responsibilities — such as migrant and drug interdiction — the Coast Guard commandant said May 21.

“One thing that everyone needs to understand is there is a finite number of resources,” Adm. Robert J. Papp Jr. said while unveiling the service’s new 10-year Arctic strategy.

The Coast Guard’s fiscal 2014 budget request, released in April, reinforced this, as the service’s acquisition, construction and improvement budget would be slashed from \$1.47 billion in fiscal 2013 to \$951 million in fiscal 2014. The overall budget request is for \$9.7 billion, and cuts discretionary funding from \$8.6 billion in fiscal 2013 to \$8 billion in fiscal 2014.

“All I can do is react and adapt to it the best I can,” Papp said.

The Coast Guard operates a seasonal presence in the Arctic and the commandant said he does not expect that to change in the next decade. He said he foresees the possible need for a full-time sector command center in the region in the next 30 years.

Papp said he’s currently happy where the Coast Guard is in terms of Arctic capabilities and resources at the present time, and he expects to continue gathering information about the area that will help the long-term mission.

The service sent the 418-foot NSC *Bertholf* to the Arctic last summer to help with Operation Arctic Shield 2012. Its work and durability in the region was widely hailed as a success by the Coast Guard.

While speaking with reporters after his address, Papp stressed that despite the Coast Guard having to balance mission priorities when sending resources to the Arctic — mainly during the spring and summer months when sea lanes are free of ice for longer periods of time and vessel traffic increases — the service will not ask for additional ships in the NSC and Offshore Patrol Cutter (OPC) programs.

“I am having enough of challenge getting the current program of records,” Papp said.

The Coast Guard has two icebreakers, *Healy* and *Polar Star*, but only the latter is for heavy icebreaking. This summer will mark the first time since 2010 *Polar Star* will be active, as it has undergone extensive repairs following a massive engine failure. A third icebreaker, *Polar Sea*, has been out of service since 2010 and is slated for dismantling.

The service has been stressing — both in Congressional hearings and public events — that it needs a new icebreaker for the past several years. The Coast Guard received \$8 million in fiscal 2013 to continue icebreaker pre-acquisition work and requested \$2 million in fiscal 2014. It’s estimated that a new icebreaker will cost in upward of \$1 billion and take more than a decade to build.

When asked about the cost during a question-and-answer session after his address, Papp said, “I feel it’s worth the cost for something that will last [around] 40 years.”

The Arctic offers a slew of challenges — from ice to high winds and lack of infrastructure to increased oil drilling and vessel traffic as polar ice melts and allow more access— and Papp said that as that continues, the region is facing an ever-increasing risk of maritime accidents.

“These growing risks demand [our] attention,” Papp said.