

CSAW

Campaign to Safeguard America's Waters



Earth Island Institute

CSAW Charts a New Course for the Cruise Industry

The cruise industry is finally steaming into chartered waters from a regulatory perspective: CSAW and the ad-hoc group Responsible Cruising in Alaska drafted and passed a statewide citizens' initiative in Alaska in 2006, which recently resulted in Alaska issuing the nation's first discharge permit for cruise ships. Alaska now requires independent marine engineers (Ocean Rangers) on every vessel. CSAW helped California adopt a zero-discharge rule in 2005, and a new bill introduced by Senator Joe Simitian and sponsored by CSAW (Senate Bill 1582) to place Ocean Rangers on cruise ships in California waters is moving through the State Senate. The California Ocean Rangers will also be public safety officers, to address the high rate of rapes, assaults, robberies, and disappearances on cruise ships. Similar legislation will soon be introduced in Congress.

The industry's public-relations flacks have of course been busy complaining Alaska's permit requirements are oppressive and Ocean Rangers are unnecessary. The fact is every major cruise line has been convicted on felony charges for dumping wastes into public waters, and the crime rates on the ships are going overboard. Ocean Rangers will assist victims, gather evidence, and most importantly, deter crimes against people and the environment before they are committed. Tighter standards and more oversight are desperately needed.

The industry's main beef with Alaska's new permit is they will not be allowed to have "mixing zones," areas where Alaska's water quality standards for toxicity, copper, zinc, nickel and ammonia won't apply. The industry is correct that without a mixing zone they are meeting a higher level of performance than most other polluters. Why should cruise ships clear a higher bar? They move and their mixing zones would move with them. Fish won't know they are getting contaminated in a mixing zone, and neither will fishermen. Furthermore, since the mixing zones of many ships would overlap, we wouldn't be able to monitor an individual discharger or area and determine when there is an impact. Mixing zone supporters claim there's enough assimilative capacity in the ocean to absorb their waste. Didn't we hear the same argument about our atmosphere's ability to absorb CO₂?

The biggest problem with authorizing mixing zones is they remove any incentive for improving treatment technologies. If you can pollute for free you won't pay someone to build a better treatment system. The technology that would bring the cruise ships into compliance with current law would also become available to other dischargers, making waters cleaner all over the nation.

The cruise lines say meeting the Alaska water quality standards without a mixing zone is impossible. Should we believe them? In 2001 they said there were no treatment systems for vessels that could remove sewage bacteria. Thanks to public pressure, not corporate citizenship, most cruise ships coming to Alaska (but few elsewhere) have improved sewage removal systems. In 2006 they predicted the \$50 Alaska head tax (another provision of the Alaska ballot initiative) would cripple their industry, if not the entire Alaska tourism economy. Thanks to the common sense of Alaskans the initiative passed despite their doom-and-gloom propaganda – and guess what – sailings, passenger numbers, and spending per passenger figures were all up in 2007. Meanwhile, impacted communities all over Alaska are receiving cruise ship tax revenues to offset the industry's effects on local infrastructure.

The cruise lines now claim crime rates on the ships are exaggerated. In fact, independent experts such as Dr. Ross Klein and members of the group International Cruise Victims (ICV) testified before Congress in 2007 that the numbers of serious crimes are grossly underestimated, and ships hide information on crimes to lessen the public relations fallout. The industry cited statements by the FBI in front of Congress to back its claim, but last month in a letter to ICV the FBI officially denied ever making the statements claimed by the industry.

Alaska and California are leading the nation by restricting harmful discharges from cruise ships and placing Ocean Rangers on board to deter crimes and pollution violations. The public, with the help of a few courageous legislators, is ensuring the billion-dollar industry follows the law by putting a cop on the cruise ship beat. It's a course correction long overdue.