

State: Access to cruise ships improves

Industry watchdog withdraws threat to sue after latest report

The state says its environmental monitors' access to cruise ships has improved in the last month.

"DEC is satisfied that (Ocean) Rangers are now getting sufficient access to complete their checklist and accomplish their duties," said Denise Koch, cruise ship program manager.

In late June, the manager of the state's Ocean Ranger program sent a status report to Department of Environmental Conservation saying that 10 out of 27 large cruise ships had restricted rangers' access in some way. The report suggested that Holland America Line and Princess Cruises had issued guidelines on "how to restrict and control the observations of the rangers."

Both Holland and Princess are owned by Carnival Corp & PLC, based in Miami and London. Eight Holland ships and eight Princess ships visited Alaska last month.

In a similar survey a month later, one ranger reported problems with two ships. He said the ships' environmental officers had limited time for him and were not providing the necessary information, according to Koch.

All the other rangers, including other rangers on those two ships, said they had the access they needed.

Koch said that after the June report, DEC met with cruise line representatives to talk about access.

"Subsequently, the companies revised their policies regarding ocean rangers to correct impediments to access," Koch wrote.

"Our goal was always to be cooperative and allow access," Princess spokesman Bruce Bustamante said.

DEC also added a question about access to the top of the rangers' daily reports.

Rangers stay aboard ships or inspect them in port. They report each day on ship activities such as safety, environmental compliance and sanitation, using checklists developed by DEC. State law requires cruise lines to allow rangers access to their ships.

This is the first year for the Ocean Ranger program, mandated by voters in a 2006 ballot initiative.

After the midseason report surfaced, Gershon Cohen, an industry watchdog who co-wrote the initiative, filed a notice of intent to sue the state or the industry if access problems continued. Hearing of improvement, he laid that threat to rest and said he was "pleased."

"We certainly attribute that improvement to both the state's stepping up to the plate, which we appreciate, and the fact that we filed a notice to sue them for breaking the law," he said.

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