



A JOINT LETTER FROM KEY MARITIME PARTNERS OPPOSING THE PRIVATIZATION OF U.S. COAST GUARD VESSEL TRAFFIC SERVICE CENTERS

October 8, 2026

The Honorable Ted Cruz
Chair
Committee on Commerce, Science,
and Transportation
U.S. Senate
Washington, DC 20515

The Honorable Maria Cantwell
Ranking Member
Committee on Commerce, Science,
and Transportation
U.S. Senate
Washington, DC 20515

The Honorable Sam Graves
Chair
Committee on Transportation
and Infrastructure
U.S. House of Representatives
Washington, DC 20515

The Honorable Rick Larsen
Ranking Member
Committee on Transportation
and Infrastructure
U.S. House of Representatives
Washington, DC 20515

SUBJ: Maritime Industry Opposes Privatization of Coast Guard Vessel Traffic Service Centers

Dear Committee Chairs and Ranking Members:

The American Association of Port Authorities (AAPA), the American Pilots' Association (APA), the American Waterways Operators (AWO), the Chamber of Shipping of America (CSA), the International Organization of Masters, Mates and Pilots (IOMM&P), the Passenger Vessel Association (PVA), and the Waterways Council, Inc. (WCI) send this joint letter to express our collective and unequivocal opposition to any plans, proposals, or initiatives aimed at privatizing – in full or in part – the United States Coast Guard's (USCG) Vessel Traffic Service (VTS) centers.

As key stakeholders dedicated to the safety, security, and economic vitality of the Marine Transportation System (MTS), we view VTS centers as foundational pillars of navigation safety, national security, and environmental stewardship. Forcing these critical communication and navigation nodes into a commercial, for-profit framework introduces unacceptable risks to our waterways, our mariners, our marine environment, and our coastal communities. Below we expand on our reasons for asking you to ensure this vital maritime safety and security service remains with the USCG, but we note from the outset that the justification for federally staffed and managed VTS has been looked at and re-affirmed by independent agencies and Congress no less than three times since 1972.¹

¹ The Ports and Waterways Safety Act (PWSA) of 1972, the foundational legislation that authorizes USCG VTS, was passed in response to a recommendation by the NTSB. A similar conclusion was reached by the National Research Council

The AAPA is the unified voice of the seaport industry in the Americas, representing more than 130 public port authorities in the U.S., Canada, the Caribbean and Latin America. For more than a century, AAPA membership has empowered port authorities and their maritime industry partners to serve global customers and create economic and social value for their communities. AAPA events, resources and partnerships connect, inform, and unify seaport leaders and maritime professionals who deliver prosperity around the western hemisphere. For its U.S. members, AAPA provides compelling advocacy and effective public outreach to influence seaports' most urgent public policy issues.

The APA has been the national association of professional maritime pilots since 1884, making APA one of the oldest trade associations in the United States. Virtually all the more than 1,250 State-licensed pilots working in the coastal ports and approaches of the United States, as well as all the U.S. registered pilots operating in the Great Lakes system under authorization by the Coast Guard, belong to APA member pilot groups. These pilots handle well over 90 percent of all large ocean-going vessels moving in international trade in the waterways of the United States. The role and official responsibility of these pilots is to protect the safety of navigation and the marine environment in the waters for which they are licensed and to keep maritime commerce flowing safely, efficiently, and securely.

The AWO is the tugboat, towboat and barge industry's advocate, resource, and united voice for safe, sustainable, and efficient transportation on America's waterways, oceans, and coasts. AWO members operate on the rivers, coasts, Great Lakes, and harbors of the United States, moving vital commodities safely, reducing air emissions, water pollution, and highway congestion, protecting homeland security, and providing family-wage jobs for tens of thousands of Americans. AWO promotes the long-term economic soundness of the industry and works to enhance its ability to provide safe, efficient, and environmentally responsible transportation.

The CSA represents U.S. based companies that either own, operate or charter oceangoing tank, container, or dry bulk vessels engaged in both the domestic and international trades and companies that maintain a commercial interest in the operation of such oceangoing vessels. Current members include companies that own or operate U.S. flag or foreign-flag vessels.

The IOMM&P is a maritime union representing the masters and navigational watch officers on U.S. flagged ships and pilots on both U.S. and foreign flagged ships engaged in international trade. The masters have overall responsibility for the efficient operation and safety of the ship, and the pilot has responsibility for the safe direction and control of the movement of the ship in designated waters while taking into consideration the public interest in protecting the marine environment.

The PVA is the national trade organization that represents the owners and operators of U.S.-flagged passenger vessels, as well as the industry suppliers who support them. Established in 1971, the PVA acts as the primary voice and advocate for the American commercial passenger marine industry.

WCI is the national public policy organization advocating for a modern and well-maintained national system of ports and inland waterways. WCI members include shippers and receivers of our nation's bulk commodities, representing diverse commodities from agriculture, manufacturing, and energy entities from around the country.

Committee on Advances in navigation and Piloting in a 1994 report. Also, the NTSB made formal recommendations for the USCG to tighten, formalize, and take more affirmative control of VTS in 2016. Finally, Congress legislated this very topic and the last Coast Guard Authorization Act that included five distinct provisions aimed at improving and strengthening the USCG's administration of VTS.

The need for strong federal government management of VTS centers has been reaffirmed after several National Transportation Safety Board (NTSB) vessel casualty investigations. Also, in its 2016 Assessment of the Effectiveness of the USCG VTS, the NTSB made recommendations for the USCG to tighten, formalize, and take more affirmative control of VTS. In making this recommendation, the NTSB noted the unique USCG authority and capabilities related to VTS, declaring, the USCG “has a national regulatory framework, policies and instructions, and infrastructure to support the use of its VTS system.”² The NTSB also made the important point that “[t]he Coast Guard is authorized to control or limit the use of waterways and establish vessel restrictions or other navigation requirements.”³ This is an area of federal legal authority that implicates international law; that is, potentially directing commercial vessels, including foreign vessels, which is squarely in the purview of the federal government. Considering that VTS is the means by which the USCG actively interacts with vessel traffic, “the NTSB believes that the Coast Guard is the appropriate authority to manage the operations of waterway navigation safety systems such as VTS.”⁴

Our shared concerns regarding the dangers of pursuing VTS privatization focus on five critical areas:

1. Degradation of Navigational Safety and Elevated Incident Risks

In some ways, VTS centers function as the “air traffic control” of our nation’s most congested and complex waterways. VTS centers are a critical component of the overall MTS and operating such a component requires absolute trust, standardized training, clear legal authorities, and objective decision-making unclouded by commercial pressures. Privatization, even partial, introduces a profit motive into a system that must prioritize public and navigation safety above all else. Under private management, cost-cutting measures could lead to understaffing, degraded technology investment, and a reliance on lower-skilled, high-turnover contracted labor, dramatically increasing the risk of catastrophic vessel collisions, groundings, and subsequent environmental disasters.

2. Severing the Direct Chain of Command with the Captain of the Port

A defining strength of the current VTS system is its seamless integration into the Coast Guard’s federal chain of command and its critical statutory Captain of the Port (COTP) authorities. VTS operators act as the direct eyes and ears of the COTP. In moments of crisis, such as severe weather events, national security threats, or critical infrastructure failures, the COTP can instantly exercise federal authority through the VTS center to direct vessel movements and enforce safety zones. A private contractor lacks federal law enforcement authority and creates an artificial, fractured layer of communication that will cripple real-time incident response and tactical coordination.

3. Maritime and Border Security Implications

VTS centers enable federal authorities to monitor marine traffic within U.S. waters, helping to deter illicit activities like smuggling, illegal immigration, and unauthorized entry. By

² National Transportation Safety Board, *An Assessment of the Effectiveness of the US Coast Guard Vessel Traffic Service System*, NTSB/SS-16/01 PB2016-104173, p. 25, September 13, 2016, <https://www.nts.gov/safety/safety-studies/Documents/SS1601.pdf>.

³ *Id.*

⁴ *Id.* at p. 26.

maintaining a watchful eye on marine vessel traffic through VTS centers, the USCG can identify and respond to suspicious activities swiftly, enhancing the overall security of maritime borders. Further, VTS centers help authorities track and identify vessels potentially involved in terrorist activities, such as transporting weapons or individuals, enhancing maritime domain awareness and counter-terrorism efforts.

4. Cyber Security Vulnerabilities and Commercial Data Conflicts

VTS centers process immense amounts of highly sensitive, proprietary data, including real-time vessel positions, hazardous cargo manifests, and commercial transit schedules. Entrusting this data to private contractors introduces severe maritime cybersecurity vulnerabilities. Furthermore, a private entity operating a VTS center creates inherent conflicts of interest, as commercial operators would be forced to share proprietary information with a third-party corporation that may have business ties to competitors.

5. Erosion of Coast Guard Maritime Domain Awareness and Expertise

VTS operations are a vital component of the Coast Guard's overall Maritime Domain Awareness (MDA). Serving in VTS centers provides Coast Guard personnel with irreplaceable, hands-on operational experience regarding the unique nuances of vessel traffic patterns, cargo trends, and local waterways. Privatizing these facilities permanently severs this pipeline of institutional knowledge, eroding the internal expertise the Coast Guard relies upon to govern our waterways effectively, execute marine safety missions, and manage third-party oversight program integrity.

The U.S. marine transportation system handles billions of tons of domestic and international commerce annually. It is a highly interconnected network where a single operational failure can close a strategic port, disrupt the global supply chain, and endanger thousands of lives. The safety and security of these waterways should never be treated as a commoditized service or outsourced to the lowest bidder.

We—the AAPA, APA, CSA, CLIA, AWO, IOMM&P, PVA, and WCI—strongly urge the Committee to use its oversight authority to safeguard our marine infrastructure by expressly prohibiting funding or administrative actions that would privatize Coast Guard Vessel Traffic Service centers, in whole or in part. Rather than divest itself of critical VTS responsibilities, the USCG should prioritize VTS funding and invest in modern standardized equipment, full staffing, and well-trained personnel. We look forward to working with your committees to ensure the Coast Guard has the funding, staff, and equipment needed to operate these vital safety centers.

Respectfully,

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