



The maritime unions have been working together with the Coast Guard to ensure that the new documentation regime is one that mariners can live with. Left to right are Capt. Ernie Fink, Commanding Officer of the Coast Guard's National Maritime Center, SIU Executive V.P. Augie Tellez, MEBA Pres. Ron Davis and SIU Secretary-Treasurer Dave Heindel.



The long-awaited revamp of the mariner credentialing system is in its last stretch before implementation. Testifying at the recent hearing were (l-r) Shull Autin (Seacor Marine), Dale Sause (American Waterways Operators), Ron Davis (MEBA) and Capt. Beth Gedney (Passenger Vessel Association). The Coast Guard's Rear Admiral Craig Bone, Assistant Commandant for Prevention, also testified.

MEBA Congressional Input Helps Shape Mariner Document Debate

MEBA recently put in its two cents on the development of the next-generation mariner credentialing at a July hearing held before a House Subcommittee. MEBA President Ron Davis, representing maritime labor, testified before the Subcommittee on Coast Guard and Maritime Transportation – part of the House Transportation and Infrastructure Committee. The hearing was designed to provide Congressional oversight on the status of Coast Guard licensing programs. It was also set up as a forum to obtain comments on mariner credentialing including the proposed Transportation Worker Identification Credential (TWIC) and the Merchant Mariner Credential (MMC). The mariner credentialing debate is an offshoot of the events of September 2001.

Under the proposal, all mariners would need to carry a TWIC, which contains a identifier that would allow unescorted access to secure areas of maritime facilities and vessels.

Under the proposed regime our members would also be required to carry an MMC – a single document consolidating the Merchant Mariner's Document, License and STCW Endorsement. The credential would contain security enhancements that would deter duplication or manipulation. Although the actual format of the MMC is not final at this stage, it is expected that it would take the

shape of a certificate suitable to hang in the rack modeled after the current license.

The development of the new system is being led by a pair of agencies within the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) MMC credentialing falls under the jurisdiction of the Coast Guard, an agency that already administers mariner documentation. TWICs are under the control of the Transportation Security Administration (TSA).

President Davis, speaking on behalf of the seagoing unions of the AFL-CIO's Maritime Trades Department, informed the subcommittee that merchant mariners are the only group requiring a TWIC under the proposed system that work in both national and international waterborne commerce, an area already regulated by Coast Guard. The introduction of the TSA role into the mariner credentialing process, Davis noted, could introduce "expensive and unnecessary duplication of efforts between the agencies governing mariners and add another "layer of bureaucracy on the current merchant mariner system..." A combined TWIC/MMC card regulated by only one agency would prove more efficient and ease the burden on merchant mariners, he offered.

In addition to the exhaustive credentialing process they undergo in the current system,

licensed U.S. mariners are further scrutinized with criminal background checks as well as random drug and alcohol tests. While U.S. mariners are hardly a security risk, Davis noted that 97% of cargo flowing into the U.S. comes aboard foreign-flag ships with non-citizen crews who aren't vetted to such a degree and who would not be subject to the MMC and TWIC rules.

Pres. Davis also advocated for federal supremacy with regard to merchant mariner documents, so that mariners need not obtain state-issued port access credentials to gain access to their vessels - a growing problem, especially in states like Florida.

The proposals won't be effective until published as a final rule. Lawmakers, disgruntled at the interminable process that has dragged on for almost five years, have helped encourage the DHS to step up credentialing development. Final rules, one each for the TWIC and MMC, could make their debut as soon as late-2006. The TWIC rule proposes an 18 month enrollment period, after which all merchant mariners must hold a TWIC. Under current proposals, the MMC rule would go into effect 18 months after the TWIC rule comes online since possession of a valid TWIC would be a mandatory requirement for the issuance of an MMC. ■