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Coast Guard Waterways Commerce Cutter (WCC) Program: Background and Issues for Congress

Introduction

The Coast Guard's Waterways Commerce Cutter (WCC) program envisages procuring 30 replacements for the Coast Guard's 35 aging river buoy tenders (WLRs), inland construction tenders (WLICs), and inland buoy tenders (WLIs). Construction of the first two WCCs began in FY2025, and the Coast Guard's FY2026 budget requests funding for the construction of another two WCCs. The Coast Guard expects construction of the first new WCC to be completed in 2027.

Terminology

Cutters are Coast Guard vessels that are more than 65 feet long and have accommodations for a crew. (Those less than 65 feet long are called boats.) *Waterways* refers here to the intra-coastal waterways along the U.S. East and Gulf coasts, and to U.S. inland waterways such as the Mississippi River. *Tenders* are vessels whose primary mission is to maintain or repair something. Coast Guard tender designations begin with *WL*, meaning Coast Guard vessel (W) and tender (L). (The W in the acronym WCC, however, stands for waterways.)

WCC Missions

WCCs perform three primary missions under the Coast Guard's statutory role of providing aids to navigation (ATON): river buoy tending; inland construction tending (which involves driving and removing piles and erecting and repairing range towers and major lights); and inland buoy tending. WCCs are used for maintaining more than 28,200 marine aids to navigation on 12,000 miles of inland waterways on which 630 million tons of cargo move each year. Additional WCC missions include search and rescue (SAR), marine safety, marine environmental protection, and ports, waterways, and coastal security.

Existing Waterways Cutters

The Coast Guard's 35 existing WCCs—including 18 WLRs, 13 WLICs, and 4 WLIs—were built to nine different designs and are now generally old or very old, having been commissioned into service in 1990-1991 (2 of them), 1976 (4), 1960-1970 (25), 1954 (2), and 1944-1945 (2).

Geographic Distribution

As of 2019, the 18 WLRs were based at cities along the Mississippi and other inland rivers in Alabama, Arkansas, Illinois, Iowa (two cutters), Kentucky (two cutters), Mississippi (three cutters), Missouri, Nebraska, Oklahoma, Pennsylvania, and Tennessee (four cutters). Although these locations are in the central and eastern United States, the rivers in question are referred to by the Coast Guard as the western rivers.

As of 2019, the 13 WLICs were based at cities along the U.S. East and Gulf coasts in Alabama, Florida (three cutters), Louisiana (two cutters), Maryland, North Carolina, South Carolina, Texas (three cutters), and Virginia. As of 2019, the four WLIs were based at locations in Alaska, Michigan, Oregon, and North Carolina.

Rationale for Building New WCCs

The Coast Guard stated in its FY2025 budget submission that it wants to replace the 35 existing waterways cutters with new WCCs because "[i]n addition to age concerns and the associated equipment obsolescence issues, the legacy fleet presents other sustainment challenges, including hazardous materials stemming from the use of asbestos and lead paint during construction of these assets. Outdated technology and vessel designs have also led to crew safety concerns, maintenance cost increases, and noncompliance with environmental regulations. Finally, legacy vessel configuration does not allow the assignment of mixed gender crews in accordance with the Coast Guard's workforce goals."

WCC Program

Program Initiation and Name

The WCC program was initiated in the Coast Guard's FY2018 budget submission. It was earlier called the Inland Waterways and Western Rivers Tender (or Cutter) program.

Acquisition Strategy

The Coast Guard wants to replace the 35 existing waterway commerce cutters with 30 new WCCs, including 16 WLRs, 11 WLICs, and 3 WLIs. The Coast Guard states,

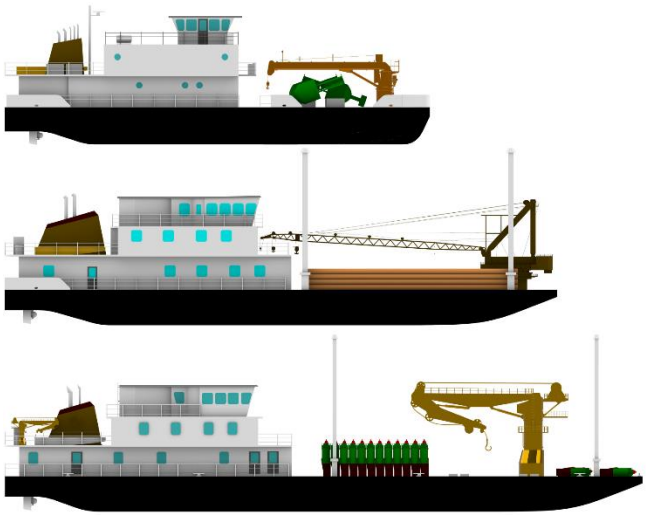
> The [16] River Buoy Tender [WLR] and [11] Inland Construction Tender [WLIC] variants will be acquired on one contract; these variants will maximize commonality with notable exceptions for hull length, working deck layout, and deck equipment, including the crane.
>
> The [3] Inland Buoy Tender[s] [WLIs] will be acquired separately from the other two variants. In June 2021, the WCC Program began partnering with the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers Marine Design Center, which has experience with similar acquisitions, to develop a Government-led design for the Inland Buoy Tender variant. The Inland Buoy Tender will be contractor-built.
>
> (U.S. Coast Guard, "Waterways Commerce Cutter," accessed January 18, 2024.)

Figure 1 and **Figure 2** show renderings of WCCs. The winner of the WLR/WLIC contract (see below) will be able to compete for the WLI contract.

Figure 1. Notional Rendering of WLIC and WLR

Source: Notional vendor rendering of WLIC (left) and WLR (right), shown at U.S. Coast Guard, "Waterways Commerce Cutter," accessed July 8, 2025.

Figure 2. Coast Guard Notional Designs for WLR, WLIC, and WLI



Source: Coast Guard illustration showing indicative (i.e., notional) designs for the WLI (top), WLIC (middle), and WLR (bottom), shown at U.S. Coast Guard, "Waterways Commerce Cutter," accessed July 8, 2025.

Acquisition Cost

A February 2025 Government Accountability Office (GAO) report on major Department of Homeland Security (DHS) acquisition programs states that as of April 2024, the WCC program's estimated total acquisition cost was $1,606 million (i.e., about $1.6 billion), including more than $400 million for shore infrastructure upgrades at the WCC homeports. (GAO Report 25-107317, pp. 68, 69.)

Contract Award

On October 5, 2022, the Coast Guard announced that it

> today awarded Birdon America, Inc. of Denver, an indefinite-delivery, indefinite-quantity firm fixed price contract with economic price adjustments for the detail design and construction of its river buoy and inland construction tenders [WLRs and WLICs]. The initial award is worth $28.49 million. The contract includes options for the construction of a total of 16 river buoy tenders [WLRs] and 11 inland construction tenders [WLICs]. If all contract line items are exercised, the total contract value is estimated at $1.19 billion.

Birdon is building WCCs at its shipyard in Bayou La Batre, AL. Birdon states that "more than 70% of the contract will be performed by small businesses, many of which are located in the Gulf Coast" (Birdon news release dated June 18, 2025).

WCC Cutter Boats

On December 18, 2024, the Coast Guard released a request for proposals (RFP) for up to 66 cutter boats called cutter boat-aids to navigation-small (CB-ATON-S), including up to 51 for the WCCs and up to 15 for other uses. Responses to the RFP were due by March 4, 2025.

February 2025 GAO Report

The February 2025 GAO report states: "Coast Guard officials said that Birdon plans to nearly triple the shipyard's workforce from 65 personnel to about 175 personnel from July 2024 to the start of construction. The Coast Guard has concerns regarding the shipyard's ability to increase personnel in that time frame due to competition from other shipbuilders in the region. As a result, it is tracking the shipyard workforce as a program risk" (GAO Report 25-107317, p. 69).

Funding

The WCC program received $1.0 million in FY2024 procurement funding, $1.0 million in FY2025 procurement funding under the FY2025 year-long continuing resolution (CR) (H.R. 1968/P.L. 119-4 of March 15, 2025), and $162.0 million in additional FY2025 procurement funding under H.R. 1/P.L. 119-21 of July 4, 2025, the One Big Beautiful Bill Act (aka reconciliation act).

The Coast Guard's FY2026 budget submission requests $98.0 million in FY2026 procurement funding for the program.

The House Appropriations Committee, in its report (H.Rept. 119-173 of June 26, 2025) on the FY2026 DHS Appropriations Act (H.R. 4213), recommends $135 million in FY2026 procurement funding for the program (pages 60 and 209). The report states: "The Committee recognizes the urgency in replacing the Service's existing fleet of inland waterways and western river cutters and fully supports the program." (Page 60)

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