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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). The Coast Guard wants to award the first contract for constructing the new WCCs in FY2022, and to have the first new WCC be in service by 2025. The WCC program received $67.0 million in FY2022 procurement funding. The Coast Guard's proposed FY2023 budget requests $77.0 million in procurement funding for the program. The issue for Congress is whether to approve, reject, or modify the Coast Guard's proposed acquisition strategy and funding requests for the WCC program.

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 (one of which is shown in **Figure 1**), are built to nine different designs, and include 18 WLRs, 13 WLICs, and 4 WLIs. As of 2020, the 35 vessels were an average of 56 years old, with the oldest two being 76 and 75 years old, the youngest two being 30 years old, and the others 44 to 66 years old.

Geographic Distribution

As of 2019, the 18 WLRs were based at cities along the Mississippi and other inland rivers in Alabama, Arkansas, Illinois, Iowa, 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.

Figure 1. Coast Guard River Buoy Tender (WLR)

Source: Coast Guard photograph.

Rationale for Building New WCCs

The Coast Guard states in its FY2023 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 non-compliance 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, and some budget documents may continue to use that name.

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 wants the first new WCC to enter service by 2025, and for all the WCCs to

be in service by 2030. The Coast Guard states that the WCC program

> partnered with the [U.S. Navy's] Naval Sea Systems Command to conduct an independent alternatives analysis to evaluate materiel and non-materiel solutions to meet mission needs within cost and schedule constraints. Additionally, the WCC Program released nine requests for information to conduct market research and has conducted engineering trade studies and design analysis, including development of indicative designs.
>
> Based on this analysis, the program has determined that three WCC variants will best meet mission needs. All three variants will be monohull ships, meaning self-propelled cutters instead of tug and barge configurations. The river buoy tender and inland construction tender variants will be acquired on one contract; these variants are expected to be common except for hull length, working deck layouts, and deck equipment, including the crane.
>
> The inland buoy tender will be procured separately from the other two variants.…
>
> The WCC Program is working under an accelerated program schedule to reach initial operational capability by 2025…. Full operational capability … is planned for 2030, although this date may change based on Coast Guard capital investment planning.
>
> (U.S. Coast Guard, "Waterways Commerce Cutter," accessed May 12, 2021.)

Figure 2 and **Figure 3** show notional Coast Guard designs for the WCCs. Vessels of this size can be built by smaller U.S. shipyards. The WLR/WLIC acquisition is to be a small business set-aside. Large businesses can team with a small business for the WLR/WLIC acquisition, but the small business would need to be responsible for at least 51% of the total cost of the contract. The winner of the WLR/WLIC contract will be able to compete for the WLI contract as well.

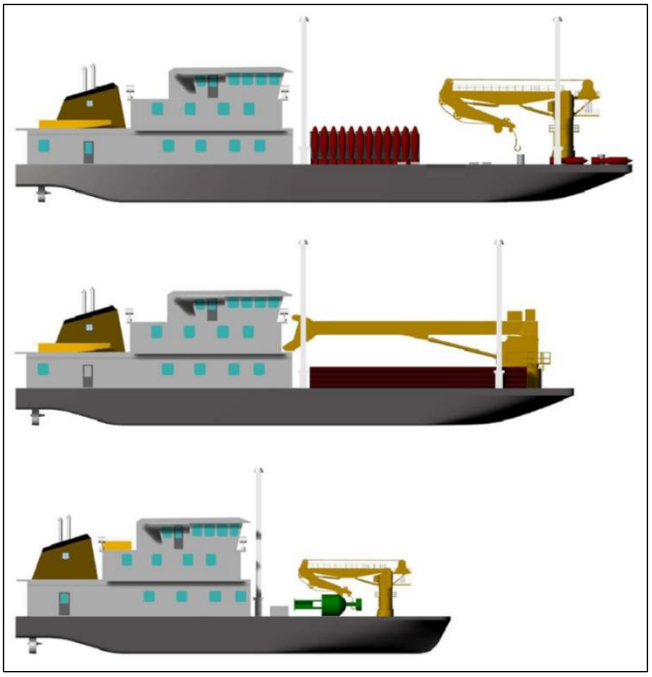
Figure 2. Coast Guard Notional Designs for WLR, WLIC, and WLI

Source: Coast Guard illustration showing indicative (i.e., notional) designs for the WLR (right), WLIC (middle), and WLI (left).

Request for Proposals (RFP)

On April 30, 2021, the Coast Guard released a request for proposals (RFP) for the design and construction of an estimated 27 WLRs and WLICs. Responses to the RFP were due by July 30, 2021. The RFP is a small business concern set-aside solicitation. The Coast Guard plans to award one Indefinite Delivery Indefinite Quantity (IDIQ) Fixed-Price (FP) with Economic Price Adjustment contract resulting from the solicitation. The Coast Guard anticipates awarding the contract in early 2022.

Figure 3. Coast Guard Notional Designs for WLR, WLIC, and WLI



Source: Coast Guard illustration showing indicative (i.e., notional) designs for the WLR (top), WLIC (middle), and WLI (bottom).

Request for Information (RFI) on Boats for WCCs

On September 29, 2021, the Coast Guard released a request for information (RFI) for up to 56 boats that are to be carried aboard the WCCs. Responses to the RFI were due by November 1, 2021.

FY2023 Funding

The Coast Guard's proposed FY2023 budget requests $77.0 million in procurement funding for the WCC program, to be used for the detailed design and construction (DD&C) contract of the initial articles of the WLR and WLIC.

The House Appropriations Committee's report (H.Rept. 117-396 of July 1, 2022) on the FY2023 DHS Appropriations Act (H.R. 8257) (pages 47 and 162) and the Senate Appropriations Committee's explanatory statement for the FY2023 DHS Appropriations Act (S. 4678), released on July 28, 2022 (page 152), both recommended approving the Coast Guard's FY2023 procurement funding request for the WCC program.

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