



## Post Sept. 11, port security up

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HOUSTON -- Five years ago, the U.S. Coast Guard's eyes on the refinery-laden Houston Ship Channel mostly watched for oil spills and traffic jams.

Now, daily patrols, multitudes of cameras and a control room packed with computer screens have increased the maritime military arm's ability to watch for anything alarming along the waterway.

The Guard calls it increased "situational awareness" since the terrorist attacks of Sept. 11, 2001 prompted more attention to potential vulnerability of the nation's ports.

But five years later, key security measures still are not in place, said Aaron Ellis, spokesman for the American Association of Port Authorities.

Ellis said individual ports have spent hundreds of millions of dollars to improve fencing, increase surveillance, improve tracking of cargoes and add personnel.

The Port of Houston, which is the No. 2 port in the United States in terms of tonnage behind the Port of South Louisiana, has been awarded \$31.5 million in federal security reimbursements. The port is home to a \$15 billion petrochemical complex that is the nation's largest, and is comprised of the Port of Houston Authority and more

than 150 private industrial companies lining the Houston Ship Channel.

"There's been a watershed change in the way that the security element has shifted from what used to be more of a theft deterrence to a terrorism deterrence mode. But there's so much more to be done," Ellis said.

A key post 9-11 concern has been getting biometric identity cards in place for workers that can be checked by uniform machines port to port so U.S. marine terminal authorities know who's on site. The cards, tested by the Transportation Security Administration, would be issued to workers who passed background checks and allow identities to be verified by matching physical characteristics such as fingerprints, handprints or eyescans to the card holder.

Ellis said port workers and others who need daily access to secure portions of ports should have the cards by year's end. But "we're still a ways away" from the additional step of having machines that would read the cards, he said.

"We're pleased that this system has made some progress, but it's still five years after the event and we don't have a credible system to identify transportation workers going in and out of the marine complex," Ellis said.

Some other efforts have been rocky as well. Radiation testing monitors aimed at helping ports track incoming and outgoing radioactive material have often tripped with false positives that prompt a closer look \_ resulting in some holdups in vessels getting to their final destinations.

"We've got to find ways to move cargo through marine terminals seamlessly, so the security process doesn't hold up the movement of trade," he said.

So far, security measures haven't bogged down marine traffic. But as trade volumes grow, most marine terminal operators are concerned about potential gridlock, Ellis said, much like airlines want to streamline holdups at security checkpoints.

And other security issues are yet to be addressed, he added. The next round of port security applications for Homeland Security Department grants are expected to seek funds with a focus on preventing attacks by vehicles that could be engineered to explode or attacks by small watercraft, like when suicide attackers rammed a bomb-laden boat into the U.S.S. Cole in Yemen in 2000, killing 17 American soldiers.

The Coast Guard has worked with industries lining the Ship Channel and Customs and Border Protection to police critical inland waterways.

But the most stark change along the channel lined by refiners could be the machine guns mounted on the patrol boats. They haven't been fired, but they're locked and loaded.

"Before 9-11, guns were not mounted to go out for routine patrols," said Capt. Marcus Woodring, acting captain of the port of Houston. "Post 9-11, you have to be ready for anything."

The Guard provides escorts, and typically boards up to five incoming vessels each day for a closer look, more often than before 9-11. Ships used to alert ports to their arrival 24 hours in advance; now it's 96 hours.

Jim Edmonds, chairman of the Port of Houston Authority Commission, said the port has been able to keep ships moving while improving security.

"Unfortunately, in the past, the private and public sectors didn't communicate. Now they do. There are good, open lines of communication. That makes me feel a lot better," he said. "The Coast Guard has done a great job of moving the mind-set, if you will, in that direction."

Steve Nerhem, director of operations at the Coast Guard's high-tech Port of Houston vessel tracking station, said each monitor displays images from cameras at 13 inbound and outbound sites all along the ship channel as well as Texas City, Bolivar and Galveston.

He said mariners also provide more watchful eyes.

"They're not going to let something bad happen on their waterway that could hurt their livelihood," he said.

"Is it 100 percent perfect? No. Would it ever be? No," Nerhem added. "But terrorists are looking for the soft target."

During a recent patrol, Second Class Machinery Technician Christopher Hinrich noted that a gunner is among the minimum three people per patrol boat, but no one rides on the bow gripping it when bouncing through wakes left by tankers and tugs.

"You'd definitely be dangling outside in the water \_ or hanging on and screaming at us," he said.

Hinrich said he and his colleagues haven't seen anything that particularly raised their hackles while on patrol, But he was quick to cut himself off mid-sentence when he spied debris in the water and a small boat could have been trespassing without a permit.

"It's a workboat," Hinrich announced to the rest of the crew when he saw one, meaning the small vessel manned by a single boater isn't a cause for alarm. They relaxed \_ but just a bit.

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