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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 have the first new WCC be in service by 2025. On October 5, 2022, the Coast Guard awarded a contract to Birdon America, Inc. of Denver, CO, to build up to 16 WLRs and 11 WLICs. The Coast Guard's proposed FY2024 budget requests \$98.0 million in procurement funding for the WCC program. The issue for Congress is whether to approve, reject, or modify the Coast Guard's proposed acquisition strategy and funding requests for the 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 2022, the 35 vessels were an average of 57 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 FY2024 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.

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 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 11 requests for information to conduct market research and conducted engineering trade studies and design analysis, including development of indicative designs.

Based on this analysis, the program 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 will maximize commonality with notable exceptions for hull length, working deck layout, and deck equipment, including the crane.

The Inland Buoy Tender 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 March 23, 2023.)

Figure 2 and **Figure 3** show renderings of WCCs. The winner of the WLR/WLIC contract (see below) will be able to compete for the WLI contract.

Figure 2. 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 March 23, 2023.

April 2021 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.

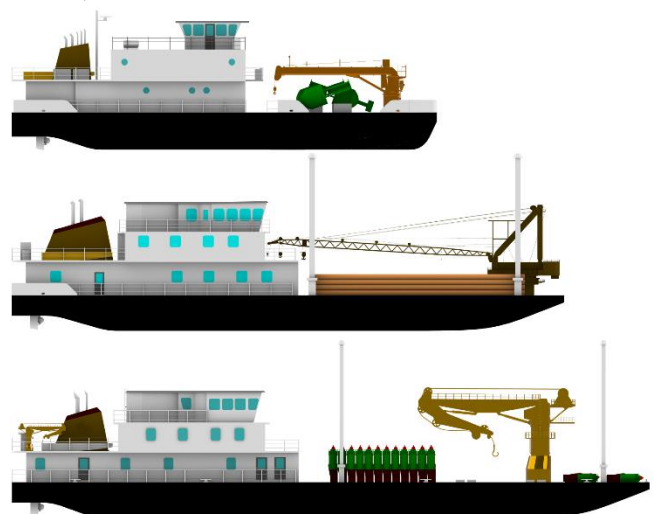
October 2022 Contract Award

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

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. 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.

A total contract value of \$1.19 billion for 27 WLRs and WLICs equates to an average cost of about \$44.1 million each.

Figure 3. 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 March 23, 2023.

September 2021 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.

FY2024 Funding

The Coast Guard’s proposed FY2024 budget requests \$98.0 million in procurement funding for the WCC program, to be used for commencing production of WLIC #1 and WLR #1; procuring long leadtime materials (LLTM) for WLIC #2 and WLR #2; continuing development of the government-led design for the WLI; finalizing the RFP for the WLI procurement; and other program activities.

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