

Thursday, July 31, 2008

Story last updated at 7/31/2008 - 9:30 am

State agency tells cruise lines to fix wastewater plans

DEC asks for more details on reduction of pollutants on ships

By Kate Golden | JUNEAU EMPIRE

The state Department of Environmental Conservation told cruise lines last week that their plans for reducing wastewater pollutants were inadequate and that current discharge allowances will be revoked unless new plans are filed by mid-August.

DEC issued a general permit in March this year that specifies limits on pollutants cruise ships can discharge in Alaska waters. Cruise lines said they couldn't meet the regulations for nickel, zinc, ammonia and copper. DEC has allowed them less strict limits for now - on the condition that they submit plans detailing how they'll eventually comply. The plans are called source reduction evaluations, or SREs.

"We do take these SREs very seriously, and they are a requirement of the permit," said Denise Koch, director of DEC's cruise ship program.

She had expected this would be a learning year, she said. It's the first year for the permit, which was mandated by a 2006 state ballot initiative.

"We're kind of charting new waters here," Koch said. "No one has ever filled out a source reduction evaluation before."

Twenty-five ships of 250 or more berths applied this year to discharge under the permit.

Cruise lines asked DEC for help earlier this year on the paperwork. DEC wrote them April 18 with guidance on how an SRE should look.

That letter asks for technical details on the ships' wastewater systems. For example, it asks the cruise lines to identify specific chemicals that might be contributing to pollutant loads, chemical characteristics of the water, what the pipes are made of, what is added to drinking water, where water is stored, and how sewage and graywater are mixed before they get treated.

"Such research should include at a minimum an examination of the space requirements, installation and maintenance costs, reliability, energy requirements, specific pollutant removal rates and any other pertinent information," DEC wrote.

The cruise ships filed SREs in June with no such details.

An SRE from the Carnival Corp.-owned Holland America Line gives instead a schedule of when the cruise ships will file more information - starting Oct. 31, well after this year's cruise season.

"The consequence for not meeting our expectations is that we can withdraw their authority to discharge under the interim limits, which would be a big problem for them," Koch said.

Alaska Cruise Association spokesman John Binkley said he was confident the cruise lines would all meet the new Aug. 18 deadline for revised SREs.

Haines-based cruise watchdog Gershon Cohen told the state this week that two nonprofit groups were ready to sue the cruise lines in 45 days if the SREs remained inadequate.

"The cruise line SRE reports made a farce of the (DEC) permit requirement. Cruise lines making billions of dollars in profits have no business telling the state what is 'practicable' when it comes to meeting our aquatic life standards," Cohen said in a statement issued by the San Francisco-based Earth Island Institute and Juneau-based Responsible Cruising in Alaska.

It was the third such legal notice in three weeks. Cohen filed one after a cruise ship, the Royal Caribbean International-owned Rhapsody of the Seas, illegally discharged 20,000 gallons of wastewater in June. He filed another after the manager of the state's Ocean Ranger environmental monitoring program reported that some companies were denying rangers full access to ships.

"Gershon was one of the sponsors of the 2006 initiative, and he's therefore very interested in making sure the program is a success," Koch said. "And I completely understand that."

"That's not what motivates us," said Binkley of the lawsuit notices. "We're following the law and dealing with DEC."

Meanwhile, while in the process of trying to comply, cruise lines are appealing the state's limits on the four effluents many ships can't meet.

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