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Gaithersburg Flotilla performs ice patrols over Chesapeake Bay and tributaries

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Every year, a group of experts gather on Maryland's Eastern Shore to discuss ice. Not how to use it in drinks or how to make a smooth surface for hockey, but how it is going to affect the Chesapeake Bay and its tributaries during the upcoming winter. The annual Ice Operations Planning Meeting is hosted by the U.S. Coast Guard Sector Maryland-National Capital Region (M-NCR) and the Delmarva Water Transport Committee. Participants include the U.S. National Ice Center, a multi-agency center operated by the U.S. Navy; the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) and the U.S. Coast Guard. The meeting is also attended by other government agencies, various shipping, barge, and tug companies, and members from Coast Guard Auxiliary Flotilla 24-04, Gaithersburg, Maryland.

Domestic Ice Operations are an important mission of the Coast Guard during the winter months. The Coast Guard regulation 33 Code of Federal Regulations (CFR) Section 165.550, provides the Captain of the Port (COTP) the authority to restrict shipping traffic within Safety Zones in 10 areas depending on the amount of ice present. This is to prevent threats to vessels, such as the inability to properly maneuver an oil tanker during severe icy conditions, which could lead to dangers for the maritime public and the environment. However, before the COTP can set the ice condition, the COTP needs information. That's where the Coast Guard

Auxiliary comes in!

During ice season, approximately 15 December through 31 March, Flotilla 24-04 often receives ice patrol requests from Ron Houck at the Sector M-NCR Waterways Management Team.

"The focus for Sector Maryland is domestic ice," Ron told 24-04 at their February Flotilla meeting. "Coast Guard Cutters and Stations submit daily surface ice reports, but Auxiliary aerial operations provide a lot of additional information."

Flying at 1,500 feet, traveling about 110 knots, Ali Talebpour, Aircraft Commander, stays close to shore in case there's a problem with the engine. Meanwhile, his aircrew tries to estimate the amount of ice around certain geographic locations and what type of ice is present. There are three different types of ice: new slushy ice, free floating pack ice, and fast ice connected to the shore.

Kristian Barton, Aircrew, says that when you're airborne, it can be challenging to determine what kind of ice is present on the water below. The light at dawn or dusk can also hamper the ability to properly identify the type of ice.

Then again, "if there's ice in the channel, that's important information to know for the shipping traffic," Ron says. The Waterways Management Team is also interested in the status of critical

aids to navigation (ATONs), such as ranges (lights used to help large vessels stay in the shipping channel), off-shore lights, and floating aids at the critical corners of shipping lanes. Aircraft Commander Judy Redlawsk says that "most ATON issues are readily visible" from her Robinson helicopter.

Sector M-NCR Waterways Management Team forwards all of this information up the chain to the COTP, who determines whether the published ice condition must be changed. If it is changed, a Maritime Safety and Security Bulletin (MSSB) is posted to the Homeport website (homeport.uscg.mil) for mariners' awareness.

This information is also forwarded to the U.S. National Ice Center, which uses it to produce weekly regional sea ice charts, such as the Mid-Atlantic Ice Analysis. These charts are colored to show the percentage of ice concentration in navigable waters and are used by military ships and commercial shipping companies to ensure the safety of their vessels.

Every Auxiliary mission is important to the Coast Guard, but sometimes it is difficult to feel the impact when submitting another report. Bob Quackenbush, Aircrew, says ice patrols are very satisfying missions. "You feel like you provide a direct value to those on ships trying to navigate potentially risky waters."