



FEDERAL MARITIME COMMISSION

Office of Commissioner Carl W. Bentzel
Office of Commissioner Daniel B. Maffei
Washington, D.C. 20573

December 3, 2020

Rear Admiral Mark H. Buzby
Maritime Administrator
U.S. Department of Transportation Maritime Administration
1200 New Jersey Avenue, S.E.
Washington, D.C. 20590

Robert R. Redfield, MD
Director
Centers for Disease Control and Prevention
200 Independence Avenue, S.W.
Washington, D.C. 20201

Dear Admiral Buzby and Doctor Redfield:

We write to you, as individual Commissioners, regarding an urgent issue currently facing the health of our essential maritime labor workforce that left unaddressed might have immediate and long-term challenges to the fluidity of our supply chain. With recent COVID-19 outbreaks impacting the maritime labor workforce and port operations, we strongly recommend that rapid COVID-19 testing be made available to the U.S. maritime labor workforce as soon as possible. Looking ahead, as vaccinations come online, we also recommend that this industry workforce be recognized as a priority for early vaccination given the ongoing role it will play in moving critical medical supplies, PPE, and vaccines.

As you know, the Department of Homeland Security's Cybersecurity and Infrastructure Security Agency (CISA) classified longshore labor and other port and intermodal transport workers as essential workers. We could not agree more with this classification for this often-overlooked portion of our national workforce. The maritime and port workforces have been and continue to be an underpublicized success story in keeping our Nation afloat during the economic dislocation caused by COVID-19.

If the maritime, port, and sealift workforces are infected, then our supply chain essentially will become infected. We appreciate the Maritime Administration's (MARAD) ongoing efforts in prioritizing vaccine testing and distribution, ensuring the marine transportation system continues to support critical commercial operations and military capabilities. It is imperative we ensure port operations and continuity of the labor workforce through the provision of protective health supplies, rapid testing supplies, and vaccination availability. We envision MARAD as best suited to raise the issue of need for Federal and state support to ensure port continuity with the provision of rapid testing supplies and vaccines.



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To date, almost on a port-by-port basis, the industry has developed its own protocols, to implement health safety standards. During this time, the industry has safely and successfully moved e-commerce, consumer goods, PPE, and other vital supplies day in and day out, when workers in many other parts of our economy are unemployed or working from their homes.

However, within the last month there have been at least three major COVID-19 outbreaks (Charleston, Philadelphia, and Los Angeles/Long Beach) impacting the immediate health of the workforce, causing substantial requirements for quarantine, and threatening freight movement through these ports.

To combat and mitigate the spread of COVID-19 within the South Carolina port workforce, for example, the Medical University of South Carolina (MUSC) and South Carolina Ports Authority (SCPA) signed an agreement for MUSC Business Health to deliver health care and wellness services to port workers in the Charleston region. This agreement was initiated by funding by the South Carolina Governor and has translated into rapid testing availability while facilitating the identification of asymptomatic workers. Further, this partnership will enable the tracking of potential large-scale COVID-19 outbreaks and mitigate the impact of surge infections that could jeopardize the supply chain.

A combination of congestion issues and the potential COVID-19 workforce disruption is an enormous risk to our economy. Congestion issues related to cargo surges are causing unprecedented conditions in our national supply chain. The confluence of the ongoing need for PPE, unexpected changes in consumer shopping patterns due to the shutdowns, and the upcoming holiday season has resulted in immense demand for imports. Industry experts believe these freight volume surges will continue into 2021.

Also, looming large, is the ramping up for the transport of vaccines for COVID-19, which could begin as early as this month. The shipping industry is already setting up special procedures through ports, which are certain to add additional pressure in what has already been a complicated year for our supply chain and workforce. As an example, the Maersk shipping line has already begun coordinating with vaccine developers, international aid agencies and public health authorities to provide broad supply chain support for the global deployment of vaccines and vaccine-related cargo. To minimize disruption to the supply chain at this precarious time, maritime and port labor must be a high-priority group for vaccination, once it is available.

Finally, we want to acknowledge the challenges and the supreme importance of the industry's efforts to keep us supplied during COVID-19. All the workers who report to work at shipping lines, railroads and trucking companies, longshore laborers and other maritime industry service providers are facing the daily challenges of COVID-19 while still getting the job done. They deserve our applause and thanks.



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The Federal government is in a unique position to initiate, coordinate and leverage industry, state, and local partnerships to meet the needs of our labor workforce and supply chain. Our supply chain, like our health, will not be safe and efficient if it is not working together. We thank you in advance for your attention to this important issue.

Sincerely,

Commissioner Carl W. Bentzel

Commissioner Daniel B. Maffei

CC:

The Honorable Alex Azar, Secretary, Department of Health and Human Services
Acting Secretary, Chad F. Wolf, Department of Homeland Security
The Honorable Roger Wicker, Chairman Senate Commerce Committee
The Honorable Maria Cantwell, Ranking Member, Senate Commerce Committee
The Honorable Peter DeFazio, Chairman, House Transportation & Infrastructure Committee
The Honorable Sam Graves, Ranking Member, House Transportation & Infrastructure Committee