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Home > House Committee hears Coast Guard testimony on Arctic icebreakers

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The House Transportation and Infrastructure Subcommittee on Coast Guard and Maritime Transportation held a hearing on July 27 on the National Icebreaker Fund Act (H.R. 3214), which would fund construction and renovation of icebreakers as well as government leases on privately owned vessels. The Coast Guard currently has two active icebreakers, of which only one is classified as a heavy icebreaker.

Subcommittee Chairman Duncan Hunter (R-CA) and Ranking Member John Garamendi (D-CA) expressed concern that the scarcity of American icebreakers poses a threat to the nation's security and its energy market. "Mapping of the sea bottom in the Arctic is crucially important," said Rep. Don Young (R-AK), whose state is most closely tied to icebreaking activities. Gary Rasicot, the Coast Guard's Director of Marine Transportation Systems, agreed that the current inventory is insufficient and recommended "recapitalizing the icebreaker fleet."

Debate primarily focused on how to pay for the ships. Rep. Hunter contended that "the Coast Guard should not bear the burden of the full cost of building an icebreaker." Rep. Young criticized the Coast Guard for failing to maintain and expand its fleet, but also blamed Congress for failing to fund the Coast Guard sufficiently. Garamendi agreed, saying, "a lot of the problem lies here in Congress." Reps. Young and Hunter discussed the possibilities of starting a lease program or a public-private partnership, and Rep. Hunter suggested shifting ownership of new vessels from the Coast Guard, which is under the Department of Homeland Security but serves as an arm of the Navy in wartime, to a different federal agency such as the Department of Defense.

Sources: AGI reporting, E&E News, House.gov
