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Ghost Fleet to be Cleaned Up and Removed from Suisun Bay

Environmental groups, San Francisco Bay Regional Water Board, and Maritime Administration reach settlement requiring clean-up of hazardous paint and disposal of all obsolete vessels

SAN FRANCISCO (March 31, 2010) – The U.S. Maritime Administration, the federal agency responsible for San Francisco Bay’s ghost fleet, has agreed to clean up and remove the abandoned and decaying ships from the Suisun Bay Reserve Fleet.

A settlement agreement announced today resolves a long-running legal battle over the decaying fleet between MARAD and the Natural Resources Defense Council, Arc Ecology, San Francisco Baykeeper, and the San Francisco Bay Regional Water Quality Control Board.

Under the settlement, which must be approved by the Court, MARAD will permanently remove all of the obsolete vessels for disposal by September 2017, starting with the worst ships first. More immediately, MARAD will get rid of the piles of hazardous paint chips from vessel decks within 120 days and, by September of next year, clean all peeling paint from the exteriors of the 25 worst ships while in dry dock.

More than 20 tons of heavy metals—including lead, zinc, copper and cadmium—have already fallen, blown or washed off the ships into the water, according to a MARAD-commissioned analysis. If not cleaned up, the vessels were projected to lose as much as an additional 50 tons of heavy metals in future years, as they succumbed to time and weather.

The environmental groups sued in 2007 to force MARAD to halt the discharge of toxic heavy metals and to clean up the vessels, which are moored near Benicia. The Regional Water Board joined the suit a year later. In January, Judge Garland Burrell sided with the plaintiffs and ruled that the decaying ships are illegally polluting the Bay.

Suisun Bay is critical habitat for several endangered and threatened species, including Chinook salmon and delta smelt. The State of California has warned residents to limit consumption of fish caught in Suisun Bay due to pollution levels. The Ghost Fleet is moored in Suisun Bay, which is just west and downstream of the Sacramento-San Joaquin Delta.

Following is a statement by Saul Bloom, executive director, Arc Ecology:

“With this agreement, we turn an important page in the relationship between the Maritime Administration and our Bay’s environment. Today we turn from litigation to the implementation of an agreement that will improve water quality and is already employing Bay Area residents as MARAD cleans away the decades of neglect that lead us to this point. We applaud MARAD, the San Francisco Bay Regional Water Quality Control Board and our colleague environmental organizations NRDC and Baykeeper for the hard work that went into crafting this agreement. What is needed now is the regional resolve to recycle these vessels locally modeling sound environmental practices and employing our people.”

Following is a statement by Michael Wall, senior attorney, NRDC:

“The San Francisco Bay should never have been a dumping ground for toxic waste. Getting these ships cleaned up and removed is a huge victory for our environment and the people of California. The Obama Administration has committed to a concrete, enforceable timetable for ending pollution violations that have been ongoing for a decade. We welcome the Administration’s commitment and look forward to working with MARAD to ensure implementation.”

Following is a statement by Deb Self, executive director, San Francisco Baykeeper:

“It has been a long process to get to this agreement, and we are very glad that MARAD is taking full responsibility for these ships, which have been poisoning Suisun Bay and its endangered species for decades. Now we can focus on making sure the job is done right.”

Following is a statement from Bruce Wolfe, executive officer, San Francisco Bay Regional Water Quality Control Board:

“Settling this litigation means that, at long last, MARAD will join nearly 4,000 other Bay Area businesses and government agencies in complying with the federal Clean Water Act and working to preserve and protect the Bay. This settlement establishes an enforceable road map for removing these floating sources of pollution from the Bay and controlling the discharges from those ships awaiting removal.”

Close-up photos and B-roll video of the ships are available at:

<http://www.vimeo.com/nrdcbroadcast/videos>

Read Michael Wall’s blogs about the Court ruling in January:

http://switchboard.nrdc.org/blogs/mwall/judge_ghost_fleet_pollution_il.html

Ghost fleet images:

http://switchboard.nrdc.org/blogs/mwall/ghost_fleet_images.html

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