

Coast guard orders its vessels to limit sailing to save on fuel

ST. JOHN'S, Nfld. (CP) - No one should be concerned by the Canadian Coast Guard's bid to reduce fuel costs by ordering its vessels in Newfoundland to refrain from unnecessary steaming, federal Fisheries Minister Robert Thibault said Thursday.

"Fuel prices have increased," he told the House of Commons. "To save money, to make sure we use the resources the best available way, we've asked them to curtail or slow down all unnecessary movements." More importantly, federal officials insist the coast guard's core services, including search and rescue, will not be compromised.

Still, critics have raised questions about fewer ocean patrols.

"Who does the minister think will patrol 20,000 kilometres of coastline in Labrador and Newfoundland if it's not the coast guard?" asked Alliance critic John Cummins.

The coast guard responds to about 600 emergency calls each year off the coasts of Newfoundland and Labrador. It also monitors ships for overfishing.

Thibault said coast guard ships aren't the only means of patrolling the high seas.

"We use aircraft, military aircraft, our own aircraft, satellite technology - all the modern technologies affordable to us . . . and they do an outstanding job," said the minister, whose department oversees the coast guard.

The coast guard's restraint measures were spelled out in a memo drafted by the agency's director of operational services.

The memo tells coast guard captains to conserve fuel by reducing "discretionary steaming" while on patrols or operations.

"You can't say the Canadian Coast Guard can't afford to put fuel in its ships but at the same time say there's no reason for concern when it comes to operational readiness," said Trevor Taylor, the province's Conservative fisheries critic and a former fisherman.

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