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BUSINESS

Smooth sailing forecast as new security rules begin at S. Florida ports

By Doreen Hemlock

and Leah Gliniewicz Business writer Medill News Service

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U.S. regulators expect some delays but no major disruptions at South Florida seaports come Thursday, when new rules for maritime security take effect worldwide.

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"Barely a handful" of private facilities at ports from Fort Pierce to Key West won't make the July 1 deadline and will have to adopt stopgap measures or close down.

Plus, most foreign-flag ships entering South Florida waters should comply on time, requiring only dockside inspections that should not delay commerce, Coast Guard Capt. James Watson said Tuesday.

"My gut feeling is that it's not going to be a huge slowdown," Watson told a news conference at Port Everglades called to offer updates on the new rules.

At issue are U.S. and international rules adopted in 2002 that take effect Thursday and aim to thwart terrorism on cargo ships, cruise ships and the ports they transit.

The Coast Guard has broad authority to enforce the rules in the United States, and the shipping community is worried that overly strict enforcement could prompt major delays, shut some routes and even potentially destabilize some smaller, poorer nations in the Caribbean that won't comply on time and that depend on U.S. trade.

Watson acknowledged that ships and ports worldwide have expended "monumental effort" to meet the July 1 deadline, and the vast majority will comply on time.

Even so, the Coast Guard will board all foreign-flag vessels that enter U.S. waters after July 1 to check their readiness.

Those foreign ships certified as compliant by their governments will be inspected dockside while their cargo is being loaded and unloaded, with no delays expected.

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"We will honor the word of foreign governments that are issuing those certifications [of compliance]," Watson said.

However, foreign ships without certifications likely will be boarded offshore, inspected for a few hours and can be turned back if unable to comply, Watson said.

The Coast Guard now has roughly 40 staffers in South Florida and 500 nationwide trained in the new maritime security laws to conduct the inspections and may be "stretched thin" to handle the work. "But it looks like we're going to be able to pull it off," Watson told reporters.

Just how many U.S. and foreign ships and ports will make or miss the deadline remains unknown, however, with final reports not due out until Thursday.

Watson voiced confidence that all major South Florida seaports -- the Port of Miami, Port Everglades and the Port of Palm Beach -- will comply, although individual terminals or companies operating at ports from Fort Pierce to Key West may not. He declined to offer any names.

Florida ports as a whole also should perform well, thanks to a state law that already required many of the security measures now included in the federal and U.N. rules.

Still, Florida ports have had to invest heavily to meet the deadline, with more outlays still to come.

Port Everglades is spending roughly \$44 million on its security program that includes new toll-plaza gates for entry and perimeter fences. The port also plans to install more than 200 closed-circuit TV cameras for surveillance later this year, said Port Director Ken Krauter.

Costs, technology and enforcement are generating widespread debate as the July 1 deadline nears, including a panel discussion Tuesday in Washington, D.C.

"I think we've done a good job. Long-term, we have a long way to go," Jim White, executive director of the Maryland Port Administration, told the panel.

One nagging concern: how to finance the new security programs the Coast Guard estimates to cost \$7.35 billion over 10 years in the United States alone.

Washington has provided more than \$500 million in grants for port security so far, but private companies will have to invest lots more too, said Asa Hutchinson, the Homeland Security Department's undersecretary for border and transportation security.

"This is a significant federal investment," Hutchinson told the



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panel. "Is it enough? I think it's a debate we'll continue to have." **Cruz**

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Doreen Hemlock can be reached at dhemlock@sun-sentinel.com or 305-810-5009.

Marc Poun
BUSINI

Joyce Kenn
CAREE

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