

Florida study lists options for harbor pilot reforms

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Options to reform the state harbor pilot system are offered in a study released today by the Florida Legislature's Office of Program Policy Analysis and Government Accountability (OPPAGA).

The Legislature asked OPPAGA to study the system in response to concerns about the regulation and compensation of harbor pilots. Most ships, including foreign-flag cruise vessels, are required by law to obtain the services of a state-licensed harbor pilot when entering or leaving Florida seaports.

Fewer than 100 harbor pilots are currently active in the state.

Critics of the existing structure, like the Florida Alliance of Maritime Organizations (FAMO), formed in 2009, view current practices as monopolistic and complain they drive up rates.

Possible alternatives identified in the OPPAGA analysis include allowing pilot exemption certificates for officers of ships that frequent Florida ports, a practice in some European countries, typically on short-sea shipping routes.

Operators of Florida-based cruise ships that use the same captain and crew assert pilots are not needed because their officers are capable of safely navigating the port.

OPPAGA also said possible rate setting or approval by elected officials or the Public Service Commission 'may have more credibility than the current system, which relies on appointed volunteers.'

Further options for consideration include establishing a formula to determine the number of pilots needed at each port.

'The current system is a detriment to the economic health of our ports and we are hopeful the Legislature will reform this outdated system this year,' said FAMO president Michele Paige, who also serves as president of the Florida-Caribbean Cruise Association.

Paige said the OPPAGA study confirmed it's time to update the 36-year-old harbor pilot structure 'to accommodate open competition whereby a larger pool of adequately trained harbor pilots can offer their services.'

The Florida Harbor Pilots Association defends the system and maintains criticism is sparked by shipping companies looking to cut pay for harbor pilots in order to reduce their bottom line.