



State study criticizes harbor pilot panels

By Steve Huettel, Times Staff Writer
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Florida harbor pilots and the shipping industry that grumbles over paying their six-figure salaries have something else to fight about: a new study on ways to change how the state regulates the profession.

The Legislature's Office of Program Policy Analysis and Government Accountability found problems with two panels that license pilots and set rates they charge to guide ships into the state's 11 deep-water ports.

But the agency also noted that pilot pay in Florida — from \$100,000 to more than \$400,000 annually — is in line with large ports in other states. Loosening pilot regulation could threaten safety and damage an industry with an economic impact of over \$70 billion in Florida, the report stated.

Cruise and cargo shipping lines have a long-running feud over fees with associations representing Florida's 94 pilots, including 21 in Tampa Bay.

The average fee for guiding a 23,200-ton ship into a state port is \$1,318, the report says. But charges vary widely by the ship's size and port location. Piloting a 58,000-ton anhydrous ammonia tanker through Tampa Bay's 45-mile channel, a four-hour trip, runs \$4,185, each way.

A study commissioned by the Florida Alliance of Maritime Organizations, a shipping trade group, reported last year that state pilots' annual salaries average \$368,000. Pay for Tampa Bay pilots, including a cash retirement payment, totals about \$300,000 a year.

Florida has two regulatory panels: the Pilotage Rate Review Board and Board Pilot Commissioners, which issues licenses and disciplines pilots.

The report released late Wednesday said both boards have vacancies and members serving expired terms. Pilots make up more than half of the Board of Pilot Commissioners, although state law provides that they hold only five of 10 seats.

That "lack of a statutorily mandated balance ... may result in allegations of bias in board decision making," the report states. In the last three fiscal years, the board received 54 complaints involving pilots but disciplined only three.

The report also took issue with the rate board. It takes into account, for example, the length of a trip when setting rates. But there's no standard definition if that includes time driving to the dock or filling out paperwork. The board also doesn't verify the information provided by pilot associations.

"Today's in-depth report reinforces what the maritime industry has long-known — the system that regulates harbor pilots is broken," said Florida Alliance of Maritime Organizations president Michelle Paige.

On the other side, pilots said the paper highlights how the current regulation system safeguards Florida waters. It warns that changing the law to let foreign ship officers navigate vessels into ports without a pilot "might pose increased security, environmental and economic risks."