

Senate panel to look at pay freeze for port pilots

By Brandon Larrabee

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TALLAHASSEE — A measure essentially placing a freeze on the rates paid to state pilots at ports across Florida faces a vote in a key Senate panel Tuesday.

The rate freeze is tucked into the Senate's budget proposal for the coming fiscal year, which begins July 1. It bars the Pilotage Rate Review Board from using its budget to pay for meetings to increase rates.

Owners of boats that require pilots to bring them to port say the need for the move is highlighted by the board's recent approval of 4.6 percent rate increases for pilots at the Port of Jacksonville in each of the next three years.

Cruise and cargo companies say they can't afford the increase in the tough economic climate.

"I'm shocked that the pilots don't know that," said Michelle Paige, president of the Florida Alliance of Maritime Organizations, an industry group.

Paige said pilots at the port make \$7,615, or about \$1,700 an hour, for bringing cruise ships into port. For cargo ships, the bill is about \$4,568, or \$1,000 an hour. According to the Florida State Pilots Association, a pilot at the port of Jacksonville makes an average of \$355,670 a year.

But Joseph Brown, president of the pilots group, says those numbers don't tell the whole story.

"All our costs have risen and we haven't had an increase in pilot rates in nearly six years," Brown said.

He said the request for the Port of Jacksonville not only reflects current needs, but also takes future income into account because it's unlikely the board will review another increase for at least another six years. Brown also argued that cruise lines are seeing record bookings and still turning a profit.

Paige counters that those lines might have to take a look at moving if there are more rate increases in the future.

"If we can make more money by bringing the ships to Europe," she said, "that's what we're going to do."