



## LEARNING TO LOVE CBP

**Great Lakes ports create productive working environment with dialogue, cooperative problem-solving**

In today's post-9/11 security environment, every Great Lakes port must work closely with the Department of Homeland Security to ensure that our maritime gateways are not used for nefarious purposes. In this environment, a critical federal agency partner is U.S. Customs and Border Protection (CBP).

CBP is the largest law enforcement agency in the United States, with more than 58,000 employees. The agency's mission is to safeguard the nation's borders and protect the public from dangerous people and materials while, at the same time, enabling legitimate trade and travel.

The breadth of CBP's activities is remarkable. Every day the agency handles more than 1 million passengers arriving into the United States, including more than 58,000 arriving by vessel. At the same time, each day the agency processes more than 79,000 shipping containers and \$6.3 billion of imported goods.

CBP's relationship with Great Lakes ports is an evolving one. New business trends are challenging both ports and the agency. This is particularly true of inspection-dependent activities such as processing cruise ship passengers and containerized cargo.

Since the Port of Cleveland and Splithoff launched the Cleveland-Europe Express container service in 2014, a number of other Great Lakes ports have been exploring shipment of containerized cargo. While the Port of Cleveland has put in place the required inspection equipment and facilities, most other ports have not. In response, CBP has put a halt to some projects.

Cruise passenger processing also requires specialized CBP-approved facilities. Most ports do not have these facilities. In recent years, through the good work of the Saint Lawrence Seaway Development Corporation (SLSDC), an alternative on-vessel clearance program was designed in partnership with CBP utilizing mobile technology. Unfortunately, CBP now intends to

sunset this program, which creates new challenges.

Beyond paying for proper CBP-compliant facilities and equipment, stakeholders have been slow to embrace the agency's suggestion that staff time be reimbursed through enrollment in CBP's Reimbursable Services Program. Some view this as paying for government services that ought to be supported by Congressional appropriations.

As CBP works to accomplish its mission, the agency has needs. Nationwide, the agency is under-staffed and under-resourced. For that reason, accommodating new port activity has been challenging for CBP's Great Lakes field offices. Testifying before Congress, agency leaders claimed to be short 500 officers to work at maritime facilities. In January, President Trump called for hiring 5,000 new agents. With a current 6 percent workforce attrition rate, the agency would need to hire 2,729 new agents a year to reach the President's goal within five years. The current hiring rate is approximately 500 agents a year and is slowed by a strict vetting process, including polygraph tests.

Clearly, CBP needs to be better funded and staffed. Ports have met with Congressional committees and urged just that. To help address staffing challenges, Wisconsin Sen. Ron Johnson, Chairman of the Senate Homeland Security Committee, has proposed legislation (S.595) to waive polygraph requirements for applicant officers who previously served in domestic law enforcement or the armed forces. The American Great Lakes Ports Association formally endorsed this legislation as a commonsense approach to increasing the trusted applicant pool.

**Herein lies the challenge. How do we help CBP accomplish its mission, while also facilitating the development of new commerce?**

Seaports and vessel operators also have needs. To their credit, they are working to launch or grow new business ventures and create jobs. However, like any start-up, these ventures are initially modest and cannot support large investments in CBP-required buildings, equipment and staffing.

Herein lies the challenge. How do we help CBP accomplish its mission, while also facilitating the development of new commerce? The solution lies in a flexible approach achieved through dialogue, relationship-building and cooperative problem-solving. The development of mobile technology for on-vessel processing of cruise passengers was an example of a flexible approach developed cooperatively.

In early August, CBP met with Great Lakes cruise stakeholders to begin work on a successor scheme. The workshop was hosted by CBP, the American Great Lakes Ports Association, the Saint Lawrence Seaway Development Corporation and the Conference of Great Lakes and St. Lawrence Governors and Premiers. Groundwork was laid for developing a limited number of strategically located clearance facilities at select Great Lakes ports. In concept, these facilities will enable cruise itinerary planners to design voyages that satisfy their customers.

CBP is an agency of police officers working every day to protect us and our families. Working in partnership, we can help each other accomplish our respective missions—to facilitate commerce and provide for homeland security. ■

**STEVE FISHER**  
Executive Director  
American Great Lakes Ports Association