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Foreign-flag offshore support vessels (OSVs) operating on the US Outer Continental Shelf (OCS) must soon follow the same safety regulations as their US-flag counterparts.

The US Coast Guard, which proposed the change on 10 January, regulates OSVs operating on the OCS. The rule will help the agency collect and analyse marine casualty data to improve safety, said the Coast Guard. Comments on the proposal are due by 10 April, after which the Coast Guard will set a timeline for an effective date.

"It's a development that our industry certainly welcomes, and we were happy to see that come out," Ben Billings, president of the Offshore Marine Service Association (OMSA), told *IHS Maritime*.

Under federal regulations, a vessel's owner, operator, or person in charge must report to the Coast Guard "most casualties involving grounding, allision, loss of propulsion or vessel maneuverability, impacts to vessel seaworthiness or fitness for service or route, loss of life, injury requiring professional medical treatment,

420

▶ number of vessels/facilities affected by ruling

Source: US Coast Guard

property damage in excess of \$25,000, or 'significant harm to the environment'."

The initial report must be followed within five days by a written report covering any alcohol or drug involvement. Foreign-flag vessels involved in the US offshore energy business, however, have more limited reporting obligations. As foreign flag-owners need not adhere to that part of the rule, the Coast Guard relies on voluntary reporting.

Casualty reports

The Coast Guard's Marine Information for Safety and Law Enforcement database contains 45 casualty incident reports from foreign-flag OSVs units in one year, which demonstrates "some level" of compliance with the new requirement, said the agency.

However, experience with the mobile offshore drilling unit (MODU) *Deepwater Horizon* revealed not all foreign-flag OCS units have been voluntarily reporting casualties. The Coast Guard discovered, for example, that the *Deepwater Horizon* had had two prior marine casualties in 2008, two years before the 2010 explosion that killed 11 people. While neither of the incidents - which were not reported to the Coast Guard - had been classified as 'serious marine incidents', they "nevertheless pointed to problems with the *Deepwater Horizon's* safety and ability to respond to safety incidents", said the Coast Guard.

According to federal regulations, serious marine incidents include those where an injury to a crew member requires professional medical treatment beyond first aid, damage

to provide the Coast Guard and other stakeholders with information needed to plan contingencies, evaluate risk, conduct trend analysis, and provide timely information," said the Coast Guard. "The proposed requirements are expected to result in a greater level of reporting by owners, operators, masters, or persons in charge of foreign-flag OSV units."

Units affected by proposal

Unit class	Number affected
Industrial vessels	310
Oil recovery vessels	9
MODUs	73
Floating OCS facilities	28
Total vessels and facilities	420

Source: US Coast Guard

▶ OMSA's safety focus

After spending 10 years on Capitol Hill working on maritime issues, Ben Billings' top priority since becoming president of the Offshore Marine Service Association (OMSA) in December has been ensuring that the association maintains its strong safety tradition.

"We function as a source of information, an intermediary, and a facilitator to promote safety to our companies," Billings told *IHS Maritime*. "The offshore marine industry's strong safety culture is ingrained in every one of our members."

OMSA advocates on behalf of its members to Congress and to government agencies both domestically and internationally. The association's 225 members include about 100 companies, which own and operate about 1,200 marine service vessels. These vessels connect the United States with its offshore energy resources, supplying rigs and platforms with items such as computers, fuel, and drinking water while also transporting thousands of workers to and from such offshore facilities.

Billings explained that employees of the association member companies are empowered with a "stop work authority": crewmen are trained to recognise safe work environments and they are encouraged to stop work if they see something unsafe that could lead to injury.

"It is a huge part of the offshore marine industry environment," he said. "That's the employer base we're attempting to provide."

Stateside safety standards

The US will require foreign-flag offshore support vessels to comply with domestic marine casualty reporting, writes **John Gallagher**



Foreign- and US-flag vessels should be on same safety footing **Ben Billings**



President of the Offshore Marine Service Association

to property in excess of \$100,000, and a discharge of oil of 10,000 gallons or more.

Improved maritime domain awareness would be one major benefit from complying with the new regulation, according to the agency. "We have long recognised that provision of adequate maritime safety, security, and environmental protection requires timely reporting of casualties

OMSA's director of government relations, Sarah Branch, said the new rule will improve safety in the Gulf. "One of things we've tried to stress to the Coast Guard and to Congress is that our vessels are continually held to a higher standard when it comes to pollution management and maritime security awareness," she said. "Foreign flag vessels should be held to the same standard." ◀