



White Paper - GeoPort Optimizing Cargo Tracking to Meet Future Needs

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Summary

Digital-based VOR Reporting brings cargo report management from years to near real-time to facilitate proper usage of the Harbor Maintenance Trust Fund. Implementation of the GeoPort platform allows for on-board vessel input, that can be transmitted as needed (daily, weekly, monthly) to the US Army Corps of Engineers (USACE) Waterborne Commerce and Statistics Center (WCSC) database. This optimization of process improves data management efficiency, reduces the effort of the regulatory manager, and expedites the intended use of data to applicable to current needs. Additionally, this data set would allow the end use to track and manage cargo tonnage by type, location, vessel route, and dock to improve the overall accountability of the agencies with jurisdictional oversight, including both the WCSC and the Department of Homeland Security (DHS).

Background

The current Vessel Operator Report (VOR) system was promulgated in association with the Harbor Maintenance Tax Act of 1986 as a means of reporting cargo as tonnage to allow an ad valorem tax assessment on the estimated value of the cargo. The collected funds were to be allocated through the Harbor Maintenance Trust Fund (HMTF) for operation and maintenance (O&M) of the federally authorized channels within the waters of the United States. This system has undergone minor modifications and revisions over the past 30 years. However, the submittal of the VOR forms remains essentially trapped in the past.



As federal funding has decreased due to budget limitations, the need for improved cargo tonnage tracking has emerged. The accurate reporting and tracking of cargo tonnage is the essential basis of the HMTF and therefore the O&M of the federally authorized channels of the United States.

Currently, the VOR forms are typically comprised of hand-written information on a the form provided by WCSC. The completed forms are collected, reviewed and then submitted on a monthly basis by the boat operator company and submitted to the WCSC as described in 33 CFR 207.800. In select situations, the information is summarized into a digital database or spreadsheet and provided to the WCSC for input, but in most instances the hand-written documents are mailed, scanned and emailed, or faxed to WCSC personnel for entry into the WCSC database for late management. This process was developed based on the technology of the time and has not been updated to take advantage of the expedited calculation and communication technologies available today. The lack of improvement has simply exacerbated an already dire situation to the fullest extent possible.

Boat operators are responsible for recording cargo information by hand on paper, which leaves copious room for mistakes and illegible marks that make data entry even more inaccurate. In addition to the Harbor Maintenance Tax, VOR submission was mandated under the [33 CFR 207.800](#) – Collection of navigation statistics (WRDA 1986). The current submission process restricts storage and recall capabilities due to a lack of standardization in data recording and entry.

Even though the Waterborne Commerce Statistics Center (WCSC) processes all VOR forms, there is no accountability during the review period for up to two years after the data was collected. If this data is not recorded and submitted, the Army Corps of Engineers may fine or block a vessel from operating should they be found in a state of non-reporting of cargo. [33 CFR 207.800.c](#) details penalties and (d) the enforcement policy.

While courts may be reluctant to enforce VOR reporting, DHS has a national security interest to collect cargo reporting data from the Maritime Commerce Security passed in December 2004 as part of the National Security Presidential Directive-41/Homeland Security Presidential Directive-13(NSPD-14/HSPD-13) Maritime Security Policy. GeoPort satisfies the law for the Department of Homeland Security and post-911 cargo collection requirements. It is also a low-cost, highly reliable alternative for immediate collection and dissemination of cargo tracking data.

Due to a lack of VOR reporting standards and accuracy as well as the budget cap, the HMT has accrued well past the funds needed for harbor maintenance, resulting in an untouchable surplus. The Water Resources Development Act of 2014 revised the budget cap to where DHS had to spend 103 percent of the previous year's allocation. The hope is to be caught up by 2025, but the numbers don't add up and the update only covers 45 percent of the accrued funding. As of 2017, the surplus exceeds \$9 billion and, at it's current rate, is expected to reach at least \$25 billion by 2025. These funds are supposed to be allocated and distributed from the Harbor Maintenance Trust Fund but are not currently being distributed.



In Louisiana alone, GeoPort could make accountable the \$250 million per year infrastructure obligation the state of Louisiana is owed through the Harbor Maintenance Trust Fund. Using GeoPort's capabilities to capture data timely and accurately will in turn procure appropriate funding through the intended law. In addition, GeoPort has been vetted by the Army Core of Engineers to ensure the software meets all requirements for deployment and data collection criteria. The only barrier now is to enact and enforce data collection through GeoPort.

Implementation

The first step to implementing GeoPort would be immediately replacing the manual data recording and entry process with GeoPort input via web and mobile devices. With this update, Boat captains would be able to move from tracking paper and deciphering illegible writing to more efficient and qualitative efforts of data analysis on reliable information. Furthermore, decision-making, budgeting, and accountability timetables are dramatically reduced since GeoPort allows data to move from 24-30 months in age to mere hours. Not only does this add excellent storage and recall to cargo information but also improves the capacity of the reviewing agency. All the while, the information being recording and transferred would no longer be determined by human error but accurate digitized responses that leave no room for debate. Reviewers would be able to access GeoPort at any time to see vessel, cargo, port and captain information, meaning reports could be issued within hours of the data submission instead of two years later. For example, 2018 Budgets are based on 2015 data, but with GeoPort, 2018 budgets would be based on 2017 data. Docks, ports, and channels change over the year, so a more timely reporting regime is crucial.

Through this accuracy and timeliness GeoPort offer, budgets and allocations of funds become more accountable and realistic. As for monitoring the use of GeoPort, DHS would be the enforcement. GeoPort would be an enforceable addition to the law already in place requiring VOR reporting.

Conclusion

GeoPort allows for reporting with no restrictions, unlimited by industry, geography or cargo type. It was built to operate on all code descriptions, water, and vessels, as an unrestricted data collector. Through basic implementation of GeoPort through web and mobile devices among vessels, VOR reporting and submission as well as budget allocations according to the Harbor Maintenance Tax Act would be made more accurate, timely and accountable. GeoPort is the proposed DHS tool for real-time cargo tracking and trust fund corrections.