Cruise Ship Waste Bill Hits House

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About a million people visit Alaska by cruise ship every year, creating floating cities along the state’s coastline. A bill that would change just how the waste they produce is regulated is moving rapidly through the legislature, and is scheduled to appear on the House floor today. APRN’s Alexandra Gutierrez reports.

Government might have a reputation for moving slowly, but the current Alaska legislature is breaking stereotype. Gov. Sean Parnell’s bill to allow mixing zones for cruise ship waste instead of having the vessels meet water quality standards at the point of discharge has breezed through committee hearings. House Speaker Mike Chenault, a Republican from Nikiski, commented on the pace at a press availability on Friday.

<<That’s pretty quick, considering
what other bills I’ve seen move over there in the past few years.>>]

So, why so fast? The Alaska Department
of Environmental Conservation has its own reasons for wanting the bill passed
in the next couple of weeks. Right now, the general discharge permit for the
cruise fleet is set to expire in April, and Commissioner Larry Hartig says the
department needs to start the renewal process by February 15 at the very
latest. If the bill were to pass after that date, ships would have to get
permitted under current standards now and then all over again once a new regime
is put in place. Hartig says the department is hoping to avoid that process.

<<We could save a lot of public’s
time and a lot of the public’s money if we could know what the rules of the
game are early.>>]

The cruise industry also wants the bill
passed sooner rather than later. John Binkley, who directs the Alaska Cruise
Association, says that some ships would have a hard time complying with
discharge standards under the current legal framework. He also says they might
have to travel outside of state waters to discharge and could end up spending
more money on fuel or eventually changing itineraries as a result.

But critics of the bill say the pace at
which the bill is moving through isn’t giving the public enough time to
comment. And a member of the state’s panel to study cruise ship pollution also
questions whether the urgency is warranted. Scientist Michelle Ridgway notes
that cruise ships still have three years before they have to meet stricter
standards, and that the Department of Environmental Conservation already has
the mechanisms in place to permit vessels under the existing law.

<<They can issue a permit. It is routine.
They knew that deadline was coming and provide it to the ships by April. That
still allows them flexibility until 2016 to meet water quality criteria at the
point of discharge.>>]

The bill is also scheduled to be heard
by the Senate finance committee this week.

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