

Cruise Ship Waste Bill Hits House

Monday, 04 February 2013

{audio}/images/stories/mp3/04_amcruise_pkg.mp3{/audio}

Alexandra Gutierrez/APRN

0

false
false
false

MicrosoftInternetExplorer4

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.

###