

Federal Budget Sequester Won't Hamper USCG Operations in Alaska

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Ed Ronco/KCAW

Federal spending cutbacks known as sequestration will have less of an impact on the Coast Guard in Alaska than they will elsewhere in the country.

That's the word from Rear Admiral Thomas Ostebo, who is in charge of the Coast Guard's District 17, which encompasses all of Alaska.

Ostebo made the remarks at an award ceremony Friday at Air Station Sitka. He says the Coast Guard is in high demand as activity picks up in Alaska, especially with offshore oil development.

-- (Ostebo 1 (0:47) "All of that is Coast Guard activity. All of that is more marine trade, more marine environmental responsibility for the Coast Guard. It's going to require the Coast Guard and Coast Guard aviation assets to have a presence up on the North Slope, and Kodiak is making preparations to be up there, in less capacity than we were last year, but more than we have been traditionally. The point of it is Alaska's a great place for the Coast Guard. It's a place we are continuously valued. I met with Lt. Gov. Treadwell yesterday. He's continuing to help from the state perspective to sing the praises of the Coast Guard and to get more resources up here for us, so we can do the things we need to do for this state. So it's a great time to be in the Coast Guard and it's really, in particular a great time to be up here in Alaska."

Ostebo says that's the good news. The bad news is that sequestration has created "uncertainty" in the budget. Tuition assistance for Coast Guard personnel is gone. Improvements for Coast Guard housing in Sitka are on hold. A request to add a fourth helicopter in Sitka will have to wait, too. And, Ostebo says, there are other uncertainties:

-- (Ostebo 2 (0:25) "We've got some icebreaker issues. We're supposed to have two ice breakers up here. Both the (Polar) Star and the Healy were going to come up. Whether they show up or not is now of great debate. Just fueling those ships is millions of dollars. You've got 1.5 million gallons capable on the Polar Star. At \$4 a gallon, it's pretty expensive to fill it up. So we're trying to figure out how best to use that, or whether we will use it at all in the Arctic."

Still, Ostebo says

District 17 has paid some bills early, and put itself in a pretty good place to whether budget cuts. He says the core missions of the Coast Guard, from rescues to navigational aid maintenance to vessel safety, will NOT change.

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