

# Pilot Dispatcher

By Mark Edward Nero

FOR THE PAST EIGHT YEARS, JAMES DIXON has worked as a pilot dispatcher at the Port of Los Angeles, a job that entails, among other things, acting as a sort of traffic cop for the various vessels coming in and out of the Los Angeles harbor each day.

"We're responsible for two things," Dixon explained. "We have the pilot management, where we send pilots out to incoming vessels to the port; and we also have vessel traffic. On the pilotage side, we're responsible for making sure the tugs and linesmen are available, as well as the pilot, to board vessels and proceed inbound. When it comes to vessel traffic, we're trying to make sure of the safety of different barges and things that are moving in the harbor."

At the Port of LA, unlike most other ports along the West Coast and around the country, port pilots and dispatchers are city employees. Dixon came to work at the port after first holding various jobs with the city, starting with the City Clerk's office 15 years ago, where he performed payroll duties for the mayor and City Council.

"I came from Accounting and had to acquire all the maritime knowledge here at the (pilots) station," he said. "Completely two different worlds."

Since the Port of Los Angeles is the busiest port in North America and the San Pedro Bay is one of the five most trafficked marine inlets in the world, it should come as no surprise that Dixon and his colleagues are somewhat busier than their counterparts at other ports on the US West Coast. They dispatch about 300 pilot jobs a month.

"We typically handle 10 to 11 (pilotage) jobs on a normal day," he said. "Our busiest peak times tend to be three in the morning to 5 am and from three in the afternoon to 5 pm, as well."

The port has five full-time dispatchers and one part-timer, and employs between 10 and 13 pilots at any given time. There is typically one dispatcher on duty per watch, working a 12-hour shift from 5:30 am to 5:30 pm, or vice versa.



James Dixon, pilot dispatcher at the Port of Los Angeles.

Dixon says one aspect of the job he really enjoys is communicating with other parties to make sure everything runs smoothly.

"We've got management, we've got the ships that are incoming and we have everybody that is internal to our department working to make sure resources are available for ships to move when they need to be moved, so we can make sure that the commerce is coming in and out of the port," he said. "I think that is the biggest part of the job for me: we are a direct communication to outside vessels, and not very many people get to come in contact with incoming vessels beyond us."

Although the Los Angeles and Long Beach ports are separate entities and each has its own pilots and dispatchers, they have a long history of periodically cooperating with one another.

"They typically handle their side and we typically handle our side, but there are some jobs that we do on both sides, moving ships back and forth between the two (ports)," he explained.

In February, the mayors of LA and Long Beach created shockwaves when they jointly announced that the cities' two ports would collaborate more on maritime issues while remaining business competitors. Dixon said the pact likely wouldn't



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have much effect on pilotages.

"It's kind of like they're catching up with what we've been doing this entire time," he said of the mayors. "With the Marine Exchange (of Southern California) and Los Angeles and Long Beach working together, we've always had some type of cooperative work on the water, at least when it comes to pilotage and vessel traffic."

However, although the two ports do collaborate on pilotage matters, not everything is smooth sailing. Sometimes the amount of resources can be limited when the harbor is busy.

"We're limited in our tugs and other resources, because they do work for both Los Angeles and Long Beach," Dixon explained. "So making sure that we cooperate with one another, even though technically we're competing with one another as well, can be difficult."

"To make sure that everything balances out," can be an issue, he said. "Making sure that we schedule ships accordingly, making sure that we do have pilots and resources available for the vessels for both sides, and ensuring that all the trade and commerce is moving for both our side and their side. I think that's probably the hardest part of the job."

As far as the most enjoyable portion of his job, Dixon said it's when a pilotage job goes as planned.

"For me, it's when you send a pilot out and he gets back and nothing has gone wrong." When everything's safe and the ship is tied up, "that is the gratification I get every day, knowing that my pilots made it out there, they've done their job, they've come back to the station and they're safe."

Dixon admits that he has concern each time he dispatches a pilot.

"We worry a lot," he said. "Not many people know what they do out there, or the conditions: we're here in rain, sleet or snow, 365 days a year. They're out there working in the elements. Just to make sure that they have the resources that they need out there, and when everything lines up and they can get back safely, is a good day for us." **FMM**