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Press Release

COMMISSIONER'S OFFICE

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State Issues Large Cruise ship General Permit for 2010 - 2012 Season

The Department of Environmental Conservation (DEC) issues its Large Commercial Passenger Vessel Wastewater Discharge General Permit for the 2010-2012 cruise ship seasons. The permit reflects recent legislation.

Today DEC issued a final permit that regulates the discharges of treated wastewater from cruise ships for the 2010-2012 seasons. The general permit applies to large cruise ships that discharge wastewater including sewage and "graywater," from sinks and showers, in state waters. Cruise lines must apply for coverage under the general permit and comply with its conditions for treatment, effluent quality, monitoring and reporting.

A 2006 voter initiative called for strict limits on wastewater discharges by large cruise ships. Legislation passed last year delayed imposition of the strict limits until 2016 and required that in the meantime cruise ships use the "most technologically effective and economically feasible" wastewater treatment available. The legislation also created a science advisory panel to look at what sorts of wastewater treatment technologies are available and affordable and to advise DEC and the legislature before the 2016 deadline.

"This permit implements the compromise legislation passed last year. It provides a very high degree of protection of our waters while taking into account the economic and other practical constraints faced by the industry," said DEC Water Division Director Lynn Kent. "No one will see or measure an adverse impact on water quality or aquatic life as long as the ships comply with the permit. At the same time, we are confident ships can comply."

For purposes of this permit, DEC has determined that a class of technology referred to as "advanced wastewater treatment systems" is the most effective approach currently available for vessels. The systems employ very fine filter membranes as a final step in the treatment process. They provide a much higher level of treatment than conventional sewage treatment technologies. All large cruise ships that routinely discharge wastewater in Alaska waters have installed these advanced systems. These ships will be able to comply with the permit provided their equipment is carefully operated and maintained.

A focus of the science advisory panel will be to look at different types of advanced wastewater treatment systems to see if certain ones perform better than others. Limited data suggest that certain types are better at removing particular kinds of pollutants. Some may be more or less expensive, more or less difficult to operate, or more or less prone to break down. The science advisory panel will look at whether there is a type of treatment system that performs better overall than others. Future permits will reflect the panel's work and advice. Find the general permit and a fact sheet at www.dec.state.ak.us/water/cruise_ships/index.htm.

Recent cruise ship related legislation

2000: Federal law increases wastewater discharge requirements on cruise ships in Alaska. Closes "donut holes."

2001: Alaska passes a groundbreaking law that establishes vessel registration, “gray” and “blackwater” discharge limits, wastewater sampling, monitoring of air emissions from cruise ship stacks, record keeping and reporting for wastewater discharges as well as solid and hazardous waste plans.
Legislation establishes the Commercial Passenger Vessel Environmental Compliance (Cruise Ship) Program to be managed by the Department of Environmental Conservation.

2006: Voter approved initiative creates strict limits for discharging sewage in state waters, establishes Ocean Ranger program, which employs marine engineers who ride cruise ships monitoring compliance with state and federal environmental requirements.

2009: State legislation addresses industry concerns that wastewater discharge limits are too difficult to meet. Establishes a compromise that requires cruise ships use the “most technologically effective and economically feasible” wastewater treatment available. The legislation also creates a science advisory panel to look at wastewater technologies.