

Residents alarmed as Coast Guard changes foghorns

December 28 2014, by Patrick Whittle

For Tom Bradbury and his neighbors, the town foghorn is more than just a familiar, wistful noise—it represents something greater, like peace itself.

"There's a sense that someone is on guard, watching over those who are on the water," Bradbury said. "We find it a very pleasing, comforting sound."

That's why Bradbury, of Kennebunkport, and hundreds of New Englanders are sounding the alarm over a Coast Guard plan to convert old-style foghorns to newer technology. The Coast Guard is converting Maine and New Hampshire foghorns that are automated to activate in the presence of fog. It says newer technology activated by mariners via marine radios—which tends to result in fewer of the foghorns' familiar blasts—is safer and more cost effective.

The move has proved unpopular in some Maine communities, and the Coast Guard will soon start a yearlong campaign to inform the public about the conversions. Coast Guard officials said its plan is for the conversions to eventually leave Maine with no more of the old-time foghorn activation systems.

So far the Coast Guard has changed seven foghorns and plans to convert 18 more. The converted foghorns range from Portsmouth, New Hampshire, to Maine's Mistake Island, about 50 miles from Canada. The lights slated for conversion are all along the coast.

The Coast Guard hopes to convert the remaining foghorns by the end of 2015, and representatives will spend the year visiting towns along the Maine coast talking to residents about the switch, said Bob Albert, chief warrant officer.

Albert said the conversions replace outdated, unserviceable 1970s technology. He added that the Coast Guard has heard complaints from residents who prefer the older models, but the new system makes it much easier for rescuers to assist mariners, if needed.

"They've indicated their preference to be able to hear the signal to add to the ambiance of living on the coast," Albert said. "Our response to that is, unfortunately, the Coast Guard does not pay for sound signals to add to that."

Opponents of the changeover, including longtime York summer resident Janet Dillon, said the older activation systems were much more frequent, which leaves residents wondering if the newer models are working at all. Dillon collected about 350 signatures from residents who opposed the switch after it happened in June.

Dillon said opinions about the old foghorn often divided people in York, with longer-established residents firmly standing by their love of the horn's tone, which she called "that haunting sound that brings me back to the days when sailors were out there hoping for safety." That sense of community is gone now, she said.

"There were some people that live in the bigger houses—we call them McMansions—who didn't like the sound of it," Dillon said. "But you know it was there a long time before they were."

The conversions cost \$800 to \$1,000 per foghorn, said Matthew Stuck, head of waterways management for the 1st Coast Guard District. He

added that the price of converting is "far less expensive than maintenance of a system that the Coast Guard no longer supports."

In Kennebunkport, Bradbury—who directs the Kennebunkport Conservation Trust, which owns the Goat Island Light where the foghorn is located—said support for the old horn is deep. The Coast Guard changed it to the newer model over the summer, then changed it back after community backlash, but intends to switch it over again.

"For the majority, certainly not for all, but for the majority there's a certain comfort to hearing the foghorn," Bradbury said.

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