

US Coast Guard Commits to Full Offshore Patrol Cutter Fleet Despite Contract Cancellations

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Despite facing delays, contract cancellations, and rising costs, the United States Coast Guard has reaffirmed its commitment to acquiring a full fleet of 25 Offshore Patrol Cutters (OPCs). The decision comes after the Department of Homeland Security canceled contracts for the third and fourth OPC hulls with Eastern Shipbuilding Group, citing continued delays

and performance concerns. However, officials have made it clear that the end goal for the fleet remains unchanged.

The contract terminations stem from production setbacks and hurricane-related disruptions that significantly slowed progress at Eastern Shipbuilding's Panama City yard. In response, the Coast Guard plans to shift construction to other shipyards, including Austal USA, which is slated to handle stage-two production. The Coast Guard emphasized that reallocating funding to more efficient shipbuilders will help safeguard taxpayer money while preserving the program's long-term mission objectives.

Initially launched in 2012 as part of the Deepwater modernization effort, the OPC program has been marred by mismanagement and soaring costs. The total projected cost has ballooned from \$12.5 billion to approximately \$17.6 billion. The lead vessel, USCGC Argus, is more than four years behind schedule, with delivery now expected in 2025, well beyond the original timeline.

To bridge the widening operational gap caused by the delays, the Coast Guard is extending the life of six aging Medium Endurance Cutters (MECs). These 270-foot vessels, many of which have exceeded their expected 30-year lifespan, are undergoing Service Life Extension Programs (SLEP) to remain in service for up to a decade longer. This move is seen as a necessary stopgap to maintain mission capability until the full OPC fleet is ready, which may not be complete until 2039.

Compounding the challenges are mounting infrastructure costs. Shore facilities required to support the new fleet have seen cost estimates triple, with upgrades and new construction now projected to exceed \$1.4

billion. Homeports in states such as Alaska, California, and Rhode Island are still awaiting critical investment.

Despite these headwinds, Coast Guard leadership insists that the OPC fleet remains a strategic necessity. The cutters are essential to key missions including drug interdiction, search-and-rescue, illegal migration response, and Arctic operations. Officials maintain that pursuing the full 25-cutter fleet is vital for ensuring maritime security and upholding national defense commitments.

In short, while delays and cancellations have tested the program, the Coast Guard is not backing down from its long-term operational vision.