National Transportation Safety Board

Washington, D.C. 20594

Safety Recommendation

Date: February 3, 2009

In reply refer to: M-08-7

Mr. John Groundwater
Executive Director
Passenger Vessel Association
801 North Quincy Street, Suite 200
Arlington, Virginia 22203

The National Transportation Safety Board is an independent Federal agency charged by Congress with investigating transportation accidents, determining their probable cause, and making recommendations to prevent similar accidents from occurring. We are providing the following information to urge you to take action on the safety recommendation in this letter. The Safety Board is vitally interested in this recommendation because it is designed to prevent accidents and save lives.

The recommendation addresses lessons to be learned from the accident involving the U.S. passenger vessel *Empress of the North* and is consistent with the evidence we found and the analysis we performed.[1] About 0130 on Monday, May 14, 2007, the 300-foot *Empress of the North*, operated by Majestic America Line, grounded on a charted rock at the intersection of Lynn Canal and Icy Strait in southeastern Alaska, about 20 miles southwest of Juneau. The vessel was negotiating a turn west out of Lynn Canal into Icy Strait on its way to Glacier Bay, the next stop on a 7-day cruise, carrying 206 passengers and 75 crewmembers. The junior third mate, a newly licensed officer, was on his first navigation watch when the vessel struck the rock, known as Rocky Island, which was illuminated by a flashing green navigation light. The U.S. Coast Guard and several good Samaritan vessels assisted in evacuating the passengers and nonessential crewmembers and safely transporting them back to Juneau. No injuries or pollution resulted from the accident. The vessel sustained $4.8 million in damage.

The Safety Board determined that the probable cause of the grounding of the *Empress of the North* was the failure of the officer of the watch and the helmsman to navigate the turn at Rocky Island, which resulted from the master's decision to assign to the midnight-to-0400 watch

[1] For further information, see *Grounding of U.S. Passenger Vessel* Empress of the North, *Intersection of Lynn Canal and Icy Strait, Southeast Alaska, May 14, 2007*, Marine Accident Report NTSB/MAR-08/02 (Washington, DC: NTSB, 2008). The report is available on the Safety Board's website at <http://www.ntsb.gov/publictn/2008/MAR0802.pdf>.

an inexperienced, newly licensed deck officer who was not familiar with the route, the vessel's handling characteristics, or the equipment on the vessel's bridge.

The day before the accident, the senior third mate on the *Empress of the North* fell ill. As a result, the master assigned the junior third mate to the midnight-to-0400 watch on May 14. The junior third mate had joined the company on May 11 and had graduated from California Maritime Academy less than 3 weeks before the accident. He held an unlimited, any-ocean third mate's license but had never before stood an underway watch on the vessel or traveled the waters of Lynn Canal. Although the master told investigators that he considered the midnight-to-0400 watch an "easy" one, the route contained at least one potential hazard (Rocky Island) and at least one critical decision for the watch officer (selecting the route from Lynn Canal into Icy Strait). The junior third mate lacked any knowledge of the route and should not have been left to make this critical decision on his own. Moreover, he told investigators that he was unfamiliar with the bridge equipment and the bridge procedures. Therefore, the Safety Board found that the master put the safety of the vessel and those on board at risk by assigning the junior third mate to the bridge watch before he was familiar with the route and the bridge equipment.

That the grounding caused no injuries was extremely fortunate, considering that it happened in the middle of the night in a remote area where the cold water would have posed a danger to persons entering it. The *Empress of the North* had an approved safety management system, which was required because the vessel traveled in international (Canadian) waters. The Safety Board's investigation, however, identified numerous violations of sound watchkeeping practice on the vessel, such as failing to keep an adequate lookout and allowing unauthorized persons on the bridge. The master had prepared no night orders for the accident voyage, despite the inexperience of the assigned watch officer. Further, the voyage plan was inadequate, containing none of the information necessary to ensure safe navigation, such as dangers or areas to be avoided.

Although the vessel's owner took action after the accident to prevent such unsafe practices, the Safety Board is concerned that experienced mariners employed by other U.S. passenger vessel companies might commit similar violations of good seamanship, especially considering that not all passenger vessels are required to have safety management systems. Consequently, the Safety Board believes that other passenger vessel operators might benefit from learning about the circumstances of the *Empress of the North* accident, and makes the following safety recommendation to the Passenger Vessel Association:

> Through your website, publications, and conferences, inform your members about the circumstances of this accident, including the need for masters to verify that officers of the navigation watch are familiar with a vessel's route, handling characteristics, and bridge equipment. (M-08-7)

The Safety Board also issued recommendations to the state and Federal maritime academies. The Board would appreciate a response from you within 90 days, addressing actions you have taken or intend to take to implement its recommendation. In your response, please refer to Safety Recommendation M-08-7. If you would like to submit your response electronically rather than in hard copy, you may send it to the following e-mail address: correspondence@ntsb.gov. If your response includes attachments that exceed 5 megabytes,

please e-mail us asking for instructions on how to use our Tumbleweed secure mailbox procedures. To avoid confusion, please use only one method of submission (that is, do not submit both an electronic copy and a hard copy of the same response letter).

Acting Chairman ROSENKER and Members HERSMAN, HIGGINS, SUMWALT, and CHEALANDER concurred with this recommendation.

[Original Signed]

By: Mark V. Rosenker
Acting Chairman