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## Getting a fix on what's traveling the high seas

By KRISTEN MILLARES BOLT  
P-I REPORTER

The latest advances in tracking marine vessels seem unimpressive at first glance: a man staring at screens, eyes hidden behind spectacles reflecting charts and database entries.

What's being attempted from Puget Sound to the waters beyond it, however, is at the forefront of a national push -- spurred by fears of domestic terrorism -- to monitor what travels by sea as precisely as airplanes.

There's a long way to go.

While the Sound is crisscrossed with radar and radio signals that provide a comprehensive view of which vessels are traveling where, ships chug through vast stretches of ocean without being accurately tracked.

When they get here, government agencies rely on the ship's master to disclose where it's been.

"As the system works now, if a ship went to North Korea and didn't tell us about it, we don't have a way to check up on them," said Bob Bohlman, executive director of the Marine Exchange of Puget Sound, a non-profit organization that tracks vessel movements for the maritime industry.

A long-range automated tracking system, called the Automated Secure Vessel Tracking System, is available. It uses a satellite to "ping" a ship's distress signaler and thereby find its location if well offshore. When close to shore, it uses land-based antennas to pick up radio signals.

Developed by the Maritime Information Service of North America -- an umbrella group for marine exchanges at ports across the country -- the system shows real-time position of ships using software created by Secure Asset Reporting Services Inc., a Bellevue-based tech company.

The marine exchanges are hoping that players in the maritime industry will recognize the commercial and safety benefits of knowing where a vessel is at all times.



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John Bruno, operations manager at the Marine Exchange of Puget Sound, uses a system that "pings" vessels to track their movement.

Though 9/11 underscored the need for such a system, it was during April 2001 that it became an urgent matter for Ed Page, the executive director of the Marine Exchange of Alaska and a retired Coast Guard captain who helped create the system.

That was when a fishing vessel called the Arctic Rose was lost in the Bering Sea with all 15 of its crew aboard, able to send only one distress signal.

It was a tragedy of an entirely different nature that compelled Congress to pass the Maritime Security Act in 2002, which directed the Department of Homeland Security to create a long-range vessel tracking system.

More than 500 vessels are using the service, companies varying in size from Horizon Lines, the U.S.'s largest ocean-going container shipping company, to Island Tug & Barge, a Seattle-based marine towing company with a fleet of 15 boats.

"It comes in handy for me because I can sleep at night knowing where my boats are," said Island President Frank Ellefson.

And, he said, "It's cheap." The service costs subscribers \$3 to \$5 per day and, for most vessel operators, doesn't require new equipment.

If enough shippers sign up, Page said, it could become "a sort of Good Housekeeping Seal of Approval" -- one the Coast Guard might use to determine whether a ship should be stopped and inspected.

Coast Guard officials haven't committed to the system, but they're interested in the early warning it provides.

"It adds to the picture that we already have," said Lt. Cmdr. Jason Tama, chief of waterways management for the Coast Guard in Seattle.

The Coast Guard tracks and directs Puget Sound-bound vessels such as cargo ships when they enter the Strait of Juan de Fuca. They do so with radar and antennas receiving reports from broadcast systems functioning like transponders aboard ships.

Those broadcasting devices, known as the Automated Identification System, have been required since 2004 on passenger and commercial vessels of a certain size by post-9/11 regulations.

Their reach, though, only goes so far in waters beyond the Sound.

That's where the Marine Exchange comes in. Its main goal is to give its members -- many of whom are big shipping lines and their agents -- information on the whereabouts of their vessels. In a constant flurry of phone calls, faxes and now e-mails, the exchange helps coordinate the ship's arrival with companies on shore, among other things.

Along the way, the exchange collects some data before the Coast Guard has it, such as when a ship intends to leave the port and where it plans to go. Tama said the Coast Guard is in the process of expanding the reach of its tracking capabilities to include swathes of the Washington and Oregon coastline, as well as the Columbia River, which is currently monitored solely by the Marine Exchange of Portland.

It's part of a larger initiative to gather more information while streamlining access to it. The exchange has taken its database, previously accessible only by its own staff, and put it on a secure Internet site for other authorized parties. It's going live in a couple of weeks.

Depending on the level of access granted by the exchange to a user, shipping lines could search their ship histories themselves, while agencies could use the database to cut down on the number of forms required from vessel operators.

Homeland security efforts have focused on this kind of information swapping, but centralizing data continues to raise concerns about who could get access to it.

While privacy is a "critical issue," Sen. Patty Murray, D-Wash., said she supports "any way we can increase safety on the water." Beyond security, such systems could be useful for tracking oil spills, she noted.

Right now, Bohlman said, the Maritime Administration, Office of Naval Intelligence, state Ecology Department, customs and the Coast Guard all have access to the information and the long-range vessel-tracking system.

Whether and how they'll use it remains to be seen.

**P-I reporter Kristen Millares Bolt can be reached at 206-448-8142 or [kristenbolt@seattlepi.com](mailto:kristenbolt@seattlepi.com).**