

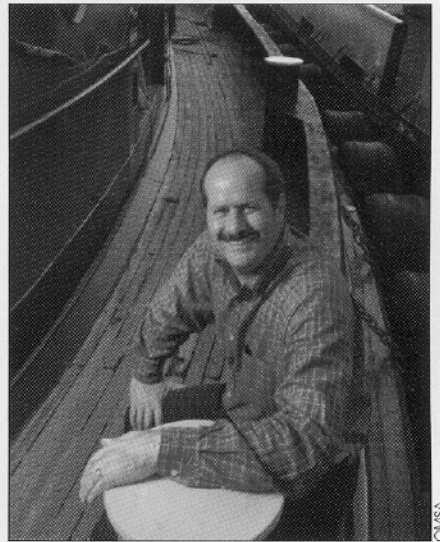
Q&A

**Ken Wells, president,
Offshore Marine Service
Association.**

INTERVIEWED BY PAMELA GLASS,
WASHINGTON CORRESPONDENT

WorkBoat: *What needs to be done to eliminate delays and fix the current mariner licensing system?*

Wells: Our industry has really borne much of the brunt of the problems experienced by the loss of the REC in New Orleans. That was the REC in choice for many offshore mariners and we have been extremely troubled by the delays that are still being experienced. One of the things that we have tried to encourage is the Streamlined Examination Process, where companies take responsibility to make sure their mariners' applications are error-free before they go to the Coast Guard.



OMSA President Ken Wells

The Coast Guard is able to move those applications along more quickly because they know they don't have mistakes. We simply can't continue a licensing process that keeps us from attracting the kind of sharp kids that can grow into that job.

WB: *What are your main concerns about the Transportation Worker Identification Credential (TWIC)?*

Wells: We have grave concerns that the process as proposed will make it difficult to attract mariners to this industry. By forcing mariners to apply and receive a TWIC before they apply for a Merchant Mariner Document, the system may create huge delays in getting entry-level personnel to work. The cost is a problem as well. We are also concerned about the TWIC being implemented at the same time the Coast Guard is reorganizing its entire maritime documentation office. This would set up the potential for a complete breakdown in the system if the TWIC and the reorganization encounter problems. We'd like to see three things happen. First, streamline the process by combining the TWIC and MMD application into one. The mariner would apply once for both documents, pay one reasonable fee and undergo one background check. Second, allow mariners to work provisionally while their application is being processed. This is the way it used to be done for MMDs. And third, bring

mariners into the system after the Coast Guard licensing reorganization has been completed. This would allow TSA to finalize its rule and work out the kinks before having to process thousands of mariner applications.

WB: *OMSA is concerned about the growing number of foreign vessels working in the oil patch that are not subject to U.S. security laws. What exactly is the concern here?*

Wells: Since the hurricanes last year, the oil-and-gas business has picked up, and as a result there has been an increase in the number of foreign vessels working in the oil patch in the Gulf of Mexico. We roughly guess that there are 100-150 a year, mostly involved in construction, pipe-laying and seismic studies. They are out there legally, but foreign vessels that go directly to our offshore oil-and-gas facilities and avoid a U.S. port are not required to provide even basic security information about who is on board, what they are doing, and who owns the vessels. Our offshore resources are too important to the nation to allow that kind of vulnerability to exist. At the same time, U.S. vessels and workers are subject to many new security checks and rules. There's a lot of anger and frustration that U.S. vessels and mariners must jump through all these hoops, while foreign vessels operate with complete freedom of movement. It is a security and a fairness argument. We need laws and regulations that require foreign vessels to comply with the same laws they must obey when they call on a port.

WB: *How bad is the mariner shortage in your industry?*

Wells: Personnel shortages are a problem throughout the American workforce. The maritime sector is no exception. However, in our case the problem is made worse by two key things. First, it is a different lifestyle. It is not a 9-to-5 job, and it is not a job that allows you to go home at night. So a part of the key is attracting people who are going to fit that lifestyle. The second problem involves the complex, cumbersome process of licensing, training and testing as you move up. We really need the government's help in streamlining the licensing and credentialing process. Unfortunately, between the current documentation process and the upcoming TWIC process, we only seem to be making it worse. The goal we should have is to attract smart kids into the maritime job market and enable them to climb up to the wheelhouse.

WB: *Are OSV companies avoiding the mistakes the industry made during the last big boom, such as overbuilding?*

Wells: There is always the danger of overbuilding, and some are certainly concerned about that. A lot of this is replacement tonnage. The industry held off on newbuilds for a long time and now that rates can support construction, there is a lot of replacement tonnage being built. The second factor is that no one really knows how long the current boom will last. It appears that there is hurricane reconstruction work through the next year. The third factor is that most of the new OSVs are being built to SOLAS (Safety of Life at Sea) standards, which means they can go anywhere in the world and work if rates crash in the United States. Finally, there are questions when and if they will all be built.