Management of commercial ship traffic

Commercial ships travel under the guidance of a captain and crew, carrying cargo between various origins and destinations across the world. When accessing confined waters like the Port of Vancouver, the ship's captain is supported by a qualified marine pilot, who determines the safest route to the intended terminal, based on their local knowledge and experience of the waterways. Active vessel traffic management is the system by which we prioritize and optimize how piloted ships and tug-and-barge traffic move within the port authority's jurisdiction. In collaboration with supply chain partners and industry stakeholders, and with support from the Government of Canada, the port authority is designing this new collaborative system to manage marine traffic flow at the Port of Vancouver and in the Southern Gulf Islands. We are also seeking input from Indigenous groups, various levels of government, community stakeholders, and the public as part of this process.

The new active vessel traffic management system will strengthen marine safety, make the flow of goods transiting to and from the Port of Vancouver more efficient, and help better manage the effects of commercial ship traffic on the environment and local communities.

Southern Gulf Island anchorages

Outside of the Port of Vancouver, ships are free to anchor in an appropriate location for a reasonable period of time per the common law right of navigation, including around the Southern Gulf Islands. Ships have anchored at specific locations in and around the Southern Gulf Islands for years as these anchorages are in deep water and can accommodate larger ships. Demand for these anchorages has increased in recent years, as a result of upstream supply chain and weather-related delays, and the changing characteristics of ships.

Role of Transport Canada

Transport Canada is responsible for regulating anchorages. With support from the Canadian Coast Guard, it is also responsible for ship safety and for protecting the marine environment through several statutes.

When developing the interim protocol, Transport Canada collaborated with the Chamber of Shipping of British Columbia, the Shipping Federation of Canada, the Pacific Pilotage Authority, the Vancouver Fraser Port Authority, and the Nanaimo Port Authority. Transport Canada also considered the views of local communities and Indigenous groups about the impact of increased use of anchorages when developing the protocol.

Southern Gulf Island anchorage jurisdiction

The Vancouver Fraser Port Authority is the federal agency responsible for the stewardship of the lands and waters that make up the Port of Vancouver, Canada's largest port. As a Canada Port Authority, our mandate is to enable Canada's trade through the Port of Vancouver, while protecting the environment, and considering local communities. As cargo volumes in the Port of Vancouver continue to grow, the port authority is working to improve the way we manage ship traffic within the port to support our vision for the Port of Vancouver to be the world's most sustainable port. Within the Port of Vancouver, the port authority manages ship traffic and the sites where these ships can anchor (called anchorages) while waiting to access a terminal. Through an interim protocol introduced by Transport Canada in 2018, the port authority also manages the assignment of the 33 anchorages around the Southern Gulf Islands to ensure a balanced use of these sites.

Role of the port authority

Within the Port of Vancouver's waters, the port authority is responsible for ship traffic management and anchorages. In 2018, Transport Canada introduced the interim protocol and requested the port authority assign anchorages at 33 locations around Vancouver Island and the Southern Gulf Islands. The interim protocol aims to balance anchorage usage and distribute ships more equitably among these designated anchorages to help mitigate community impacts and disruptions. The protocol is an interim measure put in place while a comprehensive national review of anchorages is being conducted.

The protocol area extends from Race Rocks, Haro Strait, and Boundary Pass in the south to Gabriola Island in the north and is bounded to the east and west by the Strait of Georgia and Vancouver Island. Six anchorages at the Port of Nanaimo, the five at Esquimalt (Royal Roads), and the Constance Bank anchorage, are not part of the interim protocol, and the port authority has no role in assigning or managing these. The port authority tracks the use of anchorages in the Southern Gulf Islands, and uses an algorithm to assign anchorages equitably, considering the following factors:

- Size of the ship
- Anchorage use in Vancouver
- Number of days an anchorage has been vacant
- When the anchorage was last used
- Average number of days it was occupied

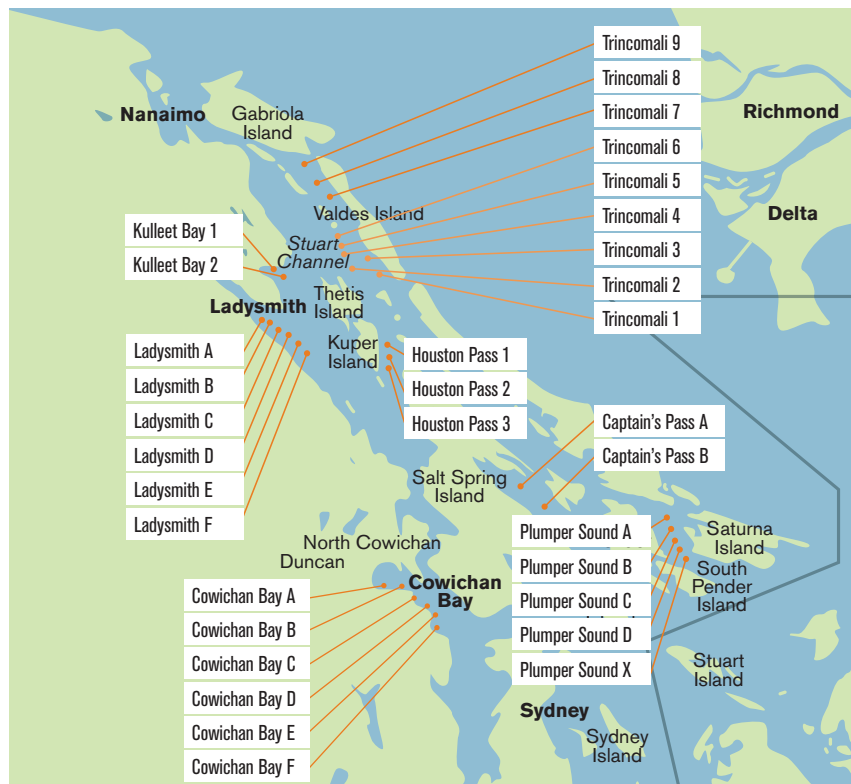The anchorages that we assign are illustrated in Figure 1.

Figure 1: Anchorages in the Interim Protocol Agreement

Role of the Pacific Pilotage Authority

The Pacific Pilotage Authority's principal mandate is to provide safe, reliable, and efficient marine pilotage and related services in the coastal waters of British Columbia including the Fraser River. The marine pilot supports the ship's captain to safely access terminals and anchorages.

Role of the Canadian Coast Guard

The Canadian Coast Guard supports safe ship navigation by providing marine communications and traffic services. It also supports emergency response if required and assists Transport Canada in providing oversight of ships at anchor.

Stay informed and engaged

Throughout 2022, the port authority raised awareness about the active vessel traffic management system and engaged with the public, Indigenous groups, and other interested parties by sharing updates, and collecting feedback about the draft anchorage code of conduct and our approach to information sharing and complaint resolution.

Visit portvancouver.com/avtmengagement or scan the QR code below for a summary of the engagement activities and feedback received to date, including how feedback is used: