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New Coast Guard boat receives great response

Cape Disappointment to get one of the first new vessels

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Photo courtesy of the U.S. Coast Guard

A mockup of the Coast Guard's new Response Boat Medium awaits inspection by guests at a keel-laying ceremony at Seattle's Kvichak Marine Industries this summer. Coast Guard Station Cape Disappointment will receive one of the boats in June 2008.



Photo courtesy of the U.S. Coast Guard

Craig Miller, manager of the

When the U.S. Coast Guard introduced the 47-foot motor lifeboat in the 1990s, she was fleet's darling.

The boat - including two at Coast Guard Station Cape Disappointment - is capable of righting itself after a full roll upside-down in the ocean, and tough enough to take a clobbering from towering waves, high winds and heavy surf.

Now a new vessel is joining the family.

Cape Disappointment will receive one of the first in the Coast Guard's latest line of response boats. The 44-foot Response Boat Medium is expected in Ilwaco in June 2008.

Overall, six Coast Guard stations will test the first group of new boats. While Cape Disappointment doesn't operate any of the 41-foot "day-to-day workhorses" the RBMs are designed to replace, it was the only West Coast site selected for the vessel's trials.

The point, said Leroy Hurt, a Coast Guard employee overseeing RBM construction in Seattle, was to assess the vessel's performance in a variety of environments, including the unpredictable and dangerous weather that earned the Columbia River mouth its nickname, "Graveyard of the Pacific."

"Surf and rough conditions in that area were one reason why Cape Disappointment was selected," Hurt said during a phone call from Seattle Tuesday. "We did want it to go into some areas where it will be challenged."

The RBM is capable of missions in 30-knot winds, although it can survive stronger, up to 50 knots. Built to navigate up to 12-foot waves, the boat may be pushed to its limits in the waters off Cape Disappointment.

Response Boat Medium project at Seattle's Kvichak Marine Industries, welds the keel of the first of 180 RBMs for the U.S. Coast Guard. The project is a major systems acquisition to replace the 41-foot utility boat that has been the Coast Guard's "workhorse" the past 30 years.

"That's not big for us; we go up much higher than that," said Lt. Matthew Hobbie, Cape Disappointment's commanding officer, noting the station's two 47-foot motor lifeboats hurtle across 20- to 30-foot seas and withstand winds up to 50 or 60 knots. "We'll test it in the higher range."

In addition, the station has the 52-foot motor lifeboat Triumph, which can stand 35-foot waves and gusts faster than 60 knots. It has a range of 600 nautical miles and can tow disabled vessels as heavy as 750 tons.

However, like the 47-footers, it's a slug compared to the RBMs, which travel nearly twice as fast as the motor lifeboats, topping out at 42.5 knots.

Speed makes the RBM useful in more situations, said Hurt.

"It will not only be able to do search and rescue, it can do other functions as well. It can support law enforcement functions, recreational boating safety, marine protection missions," he said. "That gives the station commander more flexibility."

Hurt said the boats could also be used for "defense operations."

Machine guns can be mounted on the boat and it comes equipped with a stowed armament. It's unclear whether the RBM could outpace Cape Disappointment's 25-foot "Homeland Security response boat" or 23-foot utility boat, but it would likely carry more people and travel farther away from shore, Hurt said. "It's designed to do multiple things."

In addition, it will increase capabilities of some stations that need a more robust vehicle, but perhaps one less stout than the 47-footer.

In the past, explained Hobbie, some stations have "closed half the time because they couldn't leave the harbor" in rough surf conditions, yet the 47-foot motor lifeboats would be "overkill" in places that mostly experience calm weather.

Over the next eight years, the Coast Guard plans to deliver 180 of the new response boats, built through a \$600 million contract between Wisconsin-based Marinette Marine Corporation and Kvichak Marine Industries in Seattle.

Runs at Cape Disappointment and elsewhere will help the agency determine "how the boat performs in different environments, and get feedback from people out in the field to see if this is going to meet needs," Hobbie said.

"It's a pretty big deal for the Coast Guard."

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