



## Newport Coast Guard helicopter station gets a reprieve, will remain open until January 2016

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Under an authorization passed by both chambers of Congress, the Coast Guard won't be permitted to close the air station at Newport. Coast Guard helicopters conduct search and rescue operations from the station. (*Associated Press*)

**Mike Francis | mfrancis@oregonian.com** By **Mike Francis | mfrancis@oregonian.com**

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Members of Oregon's and South Carolina's congressional delegations found a way around the U.S. Coast Guard's internal budgeting process Wednesday, passing a bill that blocks the agency from closing its helicopter air stations at Newport and Charleston, S.C.

Sen. Jeff Merkley, D-Ore., called the Coast Guard authorization bill "a literal lifesaver," saying the helicopter search-and-rescue operations are "essential to the safety of fishermen, recreational boaters and tourists."

With the Coast Guard vowing to close the Newport Air Station by next week, members and their staffers embarked on "**a full-court press**" to get the new language inserted in the authorization bill, said Merkley spokesperson Martina McLennan.

The bill, which passed the Senate Wednesday morning and the House Wednesday evening, requires the Coast Guard to keep its air stations open through Jan. 1, 2016. Its passage **was announced** by Merkley, Sen. Ron Wyden, Reps. Peter DeFazio, Kurt Schrader and Suzanne Bonamici.

The Coast Guard announced earlier this fall that it planned to save money by ending its practice of sending a helicopter and a crew from southern Oregon to operate out of Newport. The announcement alarmed fishermen and elected officials, who argued that the search and rescue capability was an essential backstop to the central coast's commercial and recreational fishing industries.

**Newport Fishermen's Wives**, a Newport nonprofit, along with the city of Newport and others, sued the Coast Guard in federal court in Eugene, asking a judge to block the Coast Guard's plans.

"The litigation was all about giving the delegation time to solve this problem politically," said **Mike Haglund**, the Portland lawyer who's representing the Fishermen's Wives.

A hearing had been scheduled on the injunction request in Eugene Thursday and Haglund said he will continue to seek the injunction to insure there are no gaps in the helicopter's presence in Newport. Late Wednesday, Judge Michael McShane canceled the hearing and scheduled a telephone conference with the lawyers.

Jennifer Schock Stevenson, president of Newport Fishermen's Wives, said she was "very surprised and very excited" to learn the Coast Guard helicopter would continue to fly from the Newport air station. She said she hoped the reprieve would give the Congressional delegation time to have a continuing conversation with the Coast Guard about keeping the station permanently in place.

Stevenson, who grew up in a fishing family and whose husband is a commercial fisherman, said a delayed rescue effort could be "the difference between life and death."

When she visits Newport's memorial to fishermen lost at sea, "I know the names on that memorial.

"I don't want to put any more names on that memorial."

-Mike Francis

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