

# **FLAPOL**

## **Up anchor: Florida Maritime Partnership launches to protect ports, shipping**

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Florida's shipping industry is the second biggest in the country, and Friday saw industry leaders vowing to protect it from being subverted.

A new report sponsored by the Transportation Institute, an industry advocacy group, found that all told, shipping creates over \$154 billion in total economic output and sustains over 650,000 jobs: \$41 billion in annual labor income.

The Jones Act, which ensures that only American built and crewed vessels can take merchandise between two domestic ports, protects the industry: an important vouchsafe given the investment in ports in the last decade.

JAXPORT, where the principals convened Friday morning, is currently in the middle of an 13-mile dredge to 47 feet. The added depth will allow large ships through.

The first three phases of the project, which will allow ships to get to Blount Island, is estimated to cost \$484 million. Thus far, federal and state money has paid for it entirely.

Principal to JAXPORT's viability: Trade with Puerto Rico, which comprises 45 percent of container traffic. JAXPORT is the number one port for the Commonwealth.

To that end, the newly-formed Florida Maritime Partnership has emerged to protect not only JAXPORT, but other Florida ports also, from potential undermining of the Jones Act.

The libertarian Cato Institute contends that there aren't enough American ships to move liquified natural gas to Puerto Rico, in an argument that traffic should be opened up to vessels with foreign flags.

The Governor of Puerto Rico applied for a ten-year waiver of the Jones Act to facilitate shipments. Congressional leaders on both sides of the aisle oppose this; however, if such were to happen, it could hurt not just JAXPORT, but other ports of call reliant on Puerto Rico traffic as part of the business model.

Northeast Florida elected leaders from all levels of government disagree, however, and on Friday they stood with the Jones Act, and the economic interest of one of Jacksonville's leading employers and economic engines.

Congressman John Rutherford noted that the "booming" industry was responsible for over 9,000 jobs in Northeast Florida, a theme revisited by other elected leaders on hand.

Rutherford said the Jones Act was a matter of "national security," and vowed to "fight tooth and nail" to protect its integrity.

He rejected the need-based argument made on behalf of Puerto Rico to subvert the law, noting that “foreign vessels can sail in anytime they want from foreign ports.”

Senate Democratic Leader Audrey Gibson, representing the other side of the aisle, described the economic engine of JAXPORT evocatively.

“Cha-ching, cha-ching, cha-ching,” Gibson said, likening the clanging noises of the increasingly active port to a cash register’s melodic tones.

Gibson lauded the “bi-partisan unity” in favor of protecting the Florida shipping sector from foreign competition.

The Jones Act, she added, is “good policy, works just fine.”

Jacksonville City Council President Aaron Bowman likewise lauded the “permanent jobs” created by shipping.

The Florida Maritime Partnership also touted bipartisan support for the Jones Act among Tampa Bay electeds. Port Tampa Bay creates more than 9,500 jobs contributes \$2 billion to the Tampa economy, FMP said.

“The importance of the maritime industry to both Florida and the United States cannot be understated. A robust maritime industry means a strong economy, good jobs, and enhanced national security,” said Democratic U.S. Rep. Charlie Crist. “I’m proud to support the work of the Florida and American Maritime Partnerships, and today’s effort to highlight the industry’s vital role to our nation.”

Sarasota Republican Rep. Vern Buchanan concurred, saying “with 15 deep water ports, including Port Manatee, Florida has an incredible opportunity to grow its maritime industry to help diversify our economy, create jobs and move goods and services.”

Those sentiments were echoed by Democratic state Sen. Darryl Rousson and Republican state Rep. Jackie Toledo, both of whom represent the Tampa Bay area.