

After meeting with Trump, Louisiana delegation says POTUS promises no waiver for Jones Act

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Louisiana leaders say they have President Donald Trump's word he won't back a proposed federal waiver to the long-standing requirement that ships carrying goods between U.S. ports be built in the country and staffed mostly by Americans.

"We made a strong case that it's pro-American worker, pro-American," U.S. Sen. Bill Cassidy, R-Baton Rouge, said after a meeting at the White House that he, U.S. Sen. John Kennedy and U.S. House Minority Whip Steve Scalise attended Wednesday. "I'm not sure we convinced him about the merits of the Jones Act but we convinced him he's not going to do anything with the Jones Act."

Officially known as the Merchant Marine Act of 1920, the Jones Act has been fiercely protected by members of Congress from Louisiana and other ship-building states that could suffer from foreign competition.

The move to protect the Jones Act would seemingly be an about-face for Trump, who just a week ago was reportedly "seriously considering" a waiver for natural gas traveling from American ports to Puerto Rico or the northeastern part of the country.

"The president said, 'Listen, you're my friends and I've decided not to touch the Jones Act,'" Cassidy told The Advocate after the meeting.

The White House didn't immediately comment on Trump's latest position, but others who attended came away with the same impression as Cassidy.

"After talking to President Trump, I am confident that he realizes how important the Jones Act is to Louisiana's maritime industry and that no changes will be made," Kennedy, R-Madisonville, said in a statement after the meeting. "Louisiana is the greatest beneficiary of the Jones Act with thousands of jobs that depend on it. Our maritime industry is part of the lifeblood of Louisiana and the Gulf Coast economy. It would be foolish to push aside those jobs in favor of foreign-made and foreign-crewed ships."

Others who took part in the meeting included Alaska Senators Dan Sullivan and Lisa Murkowski; Mississippi Senators Roger Wicker and Cindy Hyde-Smith; Transportation Secretary Elaine Chao; and several of Trump's top aides.

Critics of the Jones Act have argued it drives up costs because foreign ships often are cheaper and crews of Americans and legal residents are paid more.

A [2018 report](#) from the Cato Institute, a Washington-based libertarian think tank that has campaigned for the repeal of the Jones Act, concludes it had contributed to "higher prices, inefficiencies and forgone opportunities."

"That the Jones Act prevents Americans from buying energy from other Americans perfectly illustrates the absurdity of this outdated law," Cato policy analyst Colin Grabow said Wednesday. "President Trump should ignore the swamp dwellers and grant a waiver for the transportation of LNG immediately."

But supporters, including several members of the Louisiana delegation, have been ardent about the act. U.S. Rep. Garret Graves, a Baton Rouge Republican who is a member of the House Natural Resources Committee, has repeatedly written to the White House to make the case against granting a waiver.

"The Jones Act is the law of the land and sets the standard for 'Buy American, Hire American' policies and is consistent with your trademark 'America First' agenda," Graves wrote in a Feb. 15 letter to Trump.

New England and New York could pursue ways of transferring natural gas by pipeline, Cassidy said.

"They would have more than enough gas," he said. "There's an easy solution to it: build a pipeline."

The Jones Act has faced mounting pressure after Hurricane Maria ripped through Puerto Rico. The U.S. territory received a waiver to briefly lift the restrictions, but Louisiana leaders argued that port damage was the real reason for a delay in goods reaching the island.

In his recent letter, Graves also suggests the waiver did little to provide aid and a broader waiver would send jobs overseas.

"The Jones Act ensures that there are domestic ships, American crews and a strong defense industrial base ready at a moment's notice, a key part of our overall readiness profile," he wrote to Trump. "Tampering with the symbiotic relationship between the American marine industry and our defense industrial base could result in the destabilization of our readiness capabilities and undermine your efforts to strengthen our military."