Biden Focus on Infrastructure, Environmental Improvements Could Lift Jones Act



The new administration is expected to bolster support for the Jones Act. Crowley

ARLINGTON, Va. — President-elect Joseph R. Biden's Jr. twin goals of rebuilding America's infrastructure, while protecting the environment, could bolster support for maintaining the 100-year-old law that protects the U.S. maritime industry, according to a Washington think tank analyst.

The Biden campaign "had expressed interest in new infrastructure, in new green initiatives, and the maritime industry is actually a pretty good confluence of the two," Tim Walton, a fellow at the Hudson Institute's Center for Defense Concepts and Technology, told a Navy League webinar marking the 100th anniversary of the Jones Act.

Also known as the Merchant Marine Act of 1920, the Jones Act bars foreign-built, foreign-owned or foreign-flagged vessels from conducting coastal and inland waterway trade within the United States and between the United States and its non-contiguous states and territories such as Alaska and Puerto Rico.

The long-standing legislation could figure in plans "where we're talking about building maritime infrastructure, building low carbon emitting transportation mechanisms, green industries that support our economy in the oceans as we build a blue economy," Walton added. A "Blue Economy," according to the World Bank, is built on sustainable use of ocean resources

for economic growth, improved livelihoods and jobs and ocean ecosystem health.

Critics say the aged Jones Act has led to higher shipping costs, which are passed along as higher prices to vendors, retailers and consumers. They also maintain higher costs have driven the commercial shipbuilding industry overseas, leading to a smaller pool of qualified U.S. merchant mariners.

Without the law, U.S. Navy and Coast Guard officials have argued there would be no pool of U.S. noncombat ships – or trained American seafarers to man them – in a war or other national emergency. During the Nov. 12 webinar, former Coast Guard Commandant Adm. Paul Zukunft (retired) called for "a coherent maritime national strategy that connects with a national security strategy. That's where the Jones Act needs to be woven into our national security strategies."

Former U.S. Rep. Ernest Istook, an Oklahoma Republican, said the need for such a strategy is evident, in a world where 90% of trade is moved by ship, and Great Power competitor China is the world's biggest shipbuilder, by some measures has the world's largest navy, and is expanding its commercial ports and naval bases around the world.

Walton's comment about Biden came after a webinar viewer asked where the Democrat stood on the Jones Act. Both Biden and President Donald Trump support the law, although Trump considered, but later rejected, an extended waiver for foreign carriers to deliver liquid natural gas to hurricane wracked-Puerto Rico and LNG-dependent New England States. Biden incorporated Jones Act support in his campaign's Buy American/Ship American strategy.

"Historically, the U.S. maritime industry has been a leader in technology," Walton said, "but now in the 21st century, the Biden administration, as it appears it's going to be, will have an opportunity, I think, to take some leadership and, as

Adm. Zukunft said, actually craft an integrated national strategy for the maritime industry, and then implement it."

To read the new Navy League special report on the Jones Act and its impact, go here.