

Coast Guard Commandant 'Guardedly Optimistic' for Icebreaker Funding in 2019

ARLINGTON, Va. – Funding for the Coast Guard's requirement for new icebreakers in fiscal 2019 is in peril but the Coast Guard remains confident that a conference between the House and Senate will allow the service to begin procurement.

"We're going to be guardedly optimistic," Adm. Karl Schultz, commandant of the Coast Guard, said Dec. 14 during the Navy League's Special Topic Breakfast at the Ritz-Carlton Pentagon City. "We're hoping to build out a fleet of six icebreakers [three polar security cutters and three medium icebreakers].

"We need one now," he said, pointing out the age – 42 years – of the Coast Guard's only operational heavy icebreaker, Polar Star, which recently began its Operation Deep Freeze journey to Antarctica.

President Donald J. Trump proposed funding of the first polar security cutter (PSC) – a name applied to the future heavy icebreaker by Schultz early in his tenure – in the 2019 Coast Guard budget, part of the budget of the Department of Homeland Security (DHS). The budget's passage has been delayed over differences in the marked-up Senate version of the bill – which provides the funding—and the House version, which stripped funding Dec. 13 from its version of the bill.

The icebreaker is competing for funding desired by Trump for a more extensive southern border wall in the DHS budget.

Schultz, who has seven years of experience in legislative liaison with Congress, said "I'm going to stick by my guns that I'm guardedly optimistic" for a conference report from Congress that will fund the first PSC.

He pointed out that the first PSC would replace Polar Star, which is dedicated to annual Antarctic resupply missions. The deployment of a new icebreaker to the Arctic would have to await the commissioning of a second PSC.

Schultz plans for construction of the first PSC to begin in spring 2019. He estimates the cutter would be launched in six years and operational a year later.