

Keel Authenticated for Future Billy Frank Jr.



Release from Naval Sea Systems Command

Nov. 14, 2023

By Team Ships Public Affairs

MOBILE, Ala. – The keel for the future USNS Billy Frank Jr. (T-ATS 11), the Navy's 6th Navajo-class platform, was laid Nov. 14 at Austal USA's shipyard in Mobile, Alabama.

A keel laying ceremony recognizes the start of a ship's construction through the union of a ship's modular components and the welding, or "authentication," of an honoree's initials into a ceremonial keel plate that becomes part of the ship. On hand to authenticate the keel was ship sponsor Pegan Frank, spouse to Nisqually Tribal Council Chairman William Frank III, son of the late Billy Frank Jr.

Billy Frank Jr. was a Nisqually tribal member and an iconic Native American environmental leader and treaty rights activist. After serving in the U.S. Marine Corps during the Korean War, Frank chaired the Northwest Indian Fisheries Commission for over 30 years, receiving the Albert Schweitzer Prize for Humanitarianism and the Martin Luther King, Jr. Distinguished Service Award. President Obama posthumously awarded him the Presidential Medal of Freedom in 2015.

"The future Billy Frank Jr.'s keel laying marks the beginning of the construction journey for this ship," said John Lighthammer, program manager, Auxiliary and Special Mission Shipbuilding Program Office. "It is an honor to be joined by

members of the Nisqually Tribe and we look forward to the partnership as we highlight their heritage.”

The Navajo class is a multi-mission, common hull platform that will deploy to support a range of missions such as towing, rescue, salvage, humanitarian assistance, oil spill response and wide-area search and surveillance. The vessels will replace the existing Powhatan-class T-ATF fleet ocean tugs and Safeguard-class T-ARS rescue and salvage ships in service with the U.S. Military Sealift Command.

Austal USA is also in production of future USNS Solomon Atkinson (T-ATS 12) with an additional three more T-ATS- ships under contract.

As one of the Defense Department’s largest acquisition organizations, PEO Ships is responsible for executing the development and procurement of all destroyers, amphibious ships, special mission and support ships, and boats and craft.