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THE SHIPBREAKERS

Mikulski: Scrap U.S. ships at home

Defense panel is told that Sparrow's
Point could do wrecking job

by Gary Cohn
SUN STAFF

WASHINGTON -- Sen. Barbara A. Mikulski called yesterday for reform of the Navy's troubled ship-scraping program and suggested that obsolete ships be dismantled in the nation's established shipyards, including Baltimore's Sparrows Point.

"I think we ought to take a look at how we can turn this into an opportunity for jobs in our shipyards," the Maryland Democrat told a Defense Department panel studying how to scrap Navy ships safely. "We can use the very same set of skills needed to build ships. Our shipyards are foraging for work."

Mikulski was one of more than a dozen people, including shipscrappers and

environmentalists, who spoke to the panel yesterday at a public hearing.

The shipbreaking industry is under mounting pressure from lawmakers and environmentalists to comply with anti-pollution and worker-safety laws.

The scrutiny follows a series of articles in The Sun in December that documented the industry's record of deaths, accidents, fires, mishandling of asbestos and environmental violations at ports around the country. The articles also reported that the Navy and Defense Department make no serious effort to oversee the scrapping.

One of the most significant issues being addressed by the panel is whether U.S. government ships should be scrapped in the Third World, where worker safety and environmental regulations are virtually nonexistent.

The Navy and the Maritime Administration, which together have about 170 ships designated for scrapping, have suspended the controversial export plan.

Michael Deal, of Resource Recovery International Group Inc., a Washington state company involved in scrapping, told the panel yesterday that he favors sending the ships overseas. Deal said the U.S. government would receive more money for its ships by selling them abroad and that environmental concerns could be adequately addressed in foreign scrapyards.

"We argue for a responsible export program," Deal said.

Not overseas

But Ross Vincent, a Sierra Club

representative, told the panel that the ships should be scrapped in the United States, not overseas.

"Waste should be dealt with where it is generated," he said. "U.S. vessels should be scrapped in U.S. facilities or perhaps others nearby -- not halfway around the globe."

And in a written statement issued to the panel, Rep. George Miller, a California Democrat, said: "A global environmental leader like the United States should not have, as a national policy, the exporting of its toxic waste to developing countries ill-equipped to handle it."

Most shipbreaking overseas is done on beachfront plots in India, Pakistan and Bangladesh. In Alang, India, the largest shipbreaking center in the world, 35,000 men work and live in wretched conditions. Death by accident and disease is an everyday occurrence.

The Defense Department panel is to present its findings by March 31. A congressional hearing is scheduled March 18 before the House Subcommittee on Coast Guard and Maritime Transportation.

Mikulski told the panel that the Defense Department should rethink its approach to shipbreaking.

Since 1991, as the Navy has downsized, the Defense Department has sold its old warships to private contractors, who have tried to make a profit by selling metal salvaged from the ships. But many contractors cut corners, leading to worker-safety and environmental violations.

"For every worker injury and for every environmental pollution, we have to pay for either cleanup or health care," Mikulski said in

an interview. "There is no way to do this on the cheap. By putting it out into an American shipyard, we can do it quicker, and I believe we'll do it in a way that is better for the workers."

Stephen Sullivan, vice president of human resources for Baltimore Marine Industries Inc., told the panel that Navy ships could be scrapped at the Sparrows Point yard. Baltimore Marine Industries succeeded Bethlehem Steel Corp. as the yard's owner last year.

Singular expertise

"We have a singular combination of shipbuilding, ship conversion and ship repair expertise, facilities more than adequate to support a shipbreaking program, and a highly motivated work force that has just seen its source of livelihood rescued from the brink of oblivion," Sullivan said.

Murphy Thornton, president of Local Lodge S-33 of the Industrial Union of Marine and Shipbuilding Workers of America, expressed interest in scrapping government ships at Baltimore Marine Industries.

The yard, which once built ships, turned to repairing them to survive as shipbuilding moved overseas. He said the work force of 500 people has the skills required for breaking ships.

"We've put bottoms on ships, we've added deckhouses, we've taken down deckhouses," Thornton said. "We've taken out the midsection of ships to put new ones in. We've cut ships in two."

Thornton said some of the ships being scrapped were built at the historic yard.

"Those ships should be buried with honor and buried correctly," he said.

Sun staff writer Sean Somerville contributed to this article.

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