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NEW ORLEANS EDITION

## Customs staff replenishing urged

*Return of cruise ships  
taxes inspector crew*

By **Jaquetta White**  
Business writer

Members of the Louisiana congressional delegation have asked the U.S. Customs and

Border Protection agency to add 12 inspection officers and office workers to the New Orleans customhouse to avoid a "personnel crisis."

In a letter addressed to W. Ralph Basham, commissioner of U.S. Customs and Border Protection, four Louisiana Congressmen and two Senators said a looming staff shortage at the office could "derail many ef-

forts to bring jobs and economic growth back after Hurricanes Katrina and Rita."

While the shortage has been a concern, customs brokers and others in the trade community are worried it could reach crisis levels soon with the cruise industry's return to New Orleans this weekend.

"Once the cruise ships come in, passengers will take prefer-

ence over everything else," said John Hyatt, vice president of local customs broker and freight forwarder **The Irwin Brown Co.** "You'll have a situation where it's more difficult to get cargo cleared because there aren't enough inspectors."

The first of four home-ported cruise ships to return to New Orleans since last August will arrive Sunday. Hyatt said

the ship will require 10 to 14 inspectors to examine passengers and their luggage. That means fewer inspectors will be available to inspect cargo ships and clear their freight for release into the country.

"The strain that's already present on the current employees will only get worse," said

See **CUSTOMS, C-13**

## Delays raise shipping costs

**CUSTOMS**, from C-12

Congressman Bobby Jindal, R-Kenner.

About 25 percent of the customs staff's homes were flooded in Katrina, the letter said. Many of those employees elected to be reassigned to jobs in other cities. The positions have not been refilled, leaving the local office understaffed. The letter asks for 10 customs inspectors and two import specialists, the number of positions the port lost after the storm. Import specialists review paperwork to

ensure that cargo imported into the country does not violate international dumping and patent laws, among other things.

"The customs office should be, at the very least, back to where it was pre-Katrina," Jindal said. Customs delays could make shipping cargo to New Orleans more expensive.

"A container can only sit there for a couple days before a steamship line starts to charge demurrage," said Peggy Dicharry, president of the International Freight Forwarders and Customs Brokers Association of New Orleans.

As demurrage charges add up, shippers could begin to send cargo elsewhere, Hyatt said.

Dicharry and Hyatt expressed their concerns with members of the state's congressional delegation last month.

The resulting letter, signed by Sens. Mary Landrieu, D-La., and David Vitter, R-La., and U.S. Reps. Jindal; Richard Baker, R-Baton Rouge; Jim McCrery, R-Shreveport; Rodney Alexander, R-Quitman; Charles Boustany, R-Lafayette; and Charlie Melancon, D-Napoleonville, was sent to Basham on Tuesday.

"It's important for protecting our borders," Jindal said. "And it's also important for economic development."

Basham's office has not responded to the letter, Jindal said. But he's optimistic that the jobs will be added soon.

Telephone calls to the U.S. Customs and Border Protection agency in Washington D.C. and the director of the local customs office were not immediately returned.

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