

Mercury News

Monterey bans Crystal Cruises

COUNCIL SEEKS TO SEND MESSAGE TO INDUSTRY

By Ken McLaughlin

Mar. 20, 2003

Saying it wanted to send a powerful message to the cruise ship industry, the Monterey City Council has unanimously approved a 15-year ban on all Crystal Cruises ships for breaking a promise not to dump any wastewater into the Monterey Bay sanctuary -- and then covering up the incident for four months.

The council also voted Tuesday night to set up strict reporting requirements for cruise lines designed to ensure that local officials know immediately about any dumping in sanctuary waters in the future.

"We need to show the rest of the world and the rest of the industry that we mean business," said Mayor Dan Albert. Crystal Cruises acknowledged two weeks ago that the Crystal Harmony had discharged more than 36,000 gallons of wastewater into the Monterey Bay National Marine Sanctuary - 14 miles off Point Sur - after the ship visited Monterey on Oct. 9. The discharge, blamed on an inexperienced officer, violated not only an agreement with the city but also Crystal's own policy against discharging in marine sanctuaries.

The Los Angeles-based cruise line fired the chief officer and gave "final warnings" to the captain and two other officers. But Crystal executives did not reveal the incident until state water officials in February asked if the Crystal Harmony had dumped waste in the sanctuary.

Crystal officials said they did not reveal the incident immediately because it had violated no laws. But Carl Anderson, director of public facilities for Monterey, immediately banned the ship "forever."

Steve Scheiblauber, Monterey's harbormaster, told the council Tuesday he was "very disturbed by their attitude toward the city -- and I told the Crystal representatives as much." Anderson said he was equally disgusted with the company's "cavalier attitude."

Dan Presser, owner of FourWinds Travel in Carmel, said he was particularly outraged that Joseph Valenti, a Crystal senior vice president, had told him at a meeting in mid-January that "a handshake is all that we really need" on the sanctuary-dumping issue.

"Can you imagine the nerve of that guy," Presser said, noting that Valenti had later acknowledged knowing of the incident right away. Mimi Weisband, a Crystal spokeswoman, defended Valenti. "You cannot find a senior vice president of marine operations more committed to the environment than Joe Valenti," she said. In regard to the ban, she said Crystal officials "were disappointed, and we remain deeply apologetic. It's a bad blemish on a really fine environmental record. There are no winners in this situation." She said Crystal had not scheduled any visits for this year or next but had hoped to include the city in the future.

Monterey is rapidly becoming a popular cruise ship destination as cruise lines search for safer harbors after the Sept. 11 terrorist attacks. The 1,870-passenger Celebrity Mercury, which made its first port of call Sunday, plans a dozen more visits this year. The World of ResidenSea, a live-aboard condo cruise ship, plans an overnight stay in Monterey when it arrives on Aug. 30.

Activists and residents on Tuesday praised Anderson and Scheiblaue for taking a strong, principled stand. "We have a huge responsibility to pass this sanctuary to the next generation," said Clemencia Macias of Pacific Grove. Other speakers urged the city to call for federal and state regulations that would ban discharges in sanctuary waters and impose heavy penalties on violators. "As long as cruise ships come to Monterey, we will be in the position of trusting people who are manifestly untrustworthy," said Don Ingraham, executive director of Friends of the Sea Otter.

Councilman Clyde Roberson included a request to ask the U.S. and state governments for new laws when he made a motion to approve the new directives. Under Monterey policy, the captain or his or her designee of a cruise ship that stops in the city will have to radio or call the harbor master's office when leaving the sanctuary to report whether any discharges occurred. Additionally, the company will need to send in a written report within 14 days. Cruise line officials will also have to sign an agreement for each visit, acknowledging they are aware of the reporting requirements.