Port fights insulation requirement

Fire protection at issue

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The Port of Greater Baton Rouge is fighting a $1 million project to insulate fire protection systems from freezes in a newly built, $3.5 million storage shed approved before construction by the state Fire Marshal's Office.

The Port Commission accepted the 65,000-square-foot cargo shed as complete Wednesday in a special meeting so the port can begin using the warehouse to prevent backlogs of cargo experienced in recent months.

The shed was built with state port priority program funds.

The commission voted to appeal a state Fire Marshal demand that the port "freeze protect" the cargo shed's water mains and sprinkler system and install emergency lighting throughout the new warehouse. Plans for corrective action will be filed while the 30-day appeal process is in effect, said Port Director Gary Pruitt.

The state Fire Marshal's office signed off on original construction plans, which did not contain "freeze-protected" systems, said K.J. Thomas of Berger, Barnard & Thomas Inc., the port's engineering consultant.

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However, the Fire Marshal's Office reserved the right in a letter to the port to cite deficiencies during an inspection after construction was complete, he said. Since then, the Fire Marshal's Office has changed command.

Thomas said four other storage sheds at the port have been built without freeze protection.

During freezing temperatures, the port drains water lines to the sheds and keeps personnel and fire-fighting equipment on stand-by round-the-clock in case of a fire, Thomas said. The port has a 1 million-gallon elevated water tank, pumping system and back-up generator in place to adequately cope with a fire during a freeze.

Thomas said the Fire Marshal's Office "did not buy" those arguments. He said the procedure is acceptable to the port's insurance company and has not affected insurance rates.

If additional funding is required, it should be borne by the state, said Port Commissioner Larry Johnson. The state Department of Transportation and Development, which administered the funding on the project, and state Fire Marshal's Office approved construction plans, Johnson said.

Commissioner Lawrence "Football" Badeaux said the Fire Marshal's request after completion of construction is "ridiculous." He said the situation should be taken to the governor, if necessary.

In another action, the port's engineering and executive committees approved paying $8,034 of a $10,253 bill that DOTD refused to fully pay for testing of concrete and paint samples during construction of the storage shed.

Pruitt said DOTD had not told the port before construction that it should use DOTD laboratories for testing.

The port hired Delta Testing & Inspection for the project. DOTD is picking up $2,219 of the cost because its labs aren't capable of doing some of the required testing.

Badeaux said the port should continue to use independent contractors for testing to expedite construction projects, rather than rely on the state.

Concerned about the payment, Johnson cautioned the port's staff about oversights on recent projects that have resulted in change orders and unforeseen bills.

"I'm having a problem with these little bills ... popping up that we don't have budgeted," Johnson said.

Port Commission President Lawrence Carter told staff members to look more closely at details.

The commission's finance/administration and executive committee approved new policies that will allow the port to diversify its investment portfolio in an effort to get higher rates of return.

The port's investments are limited to bank certificates of deposit, which are earning low interest rates. The new policy will allow the port to invest in government-backed securities and an investment pool for local governments being established by the State Treasurer's Office.

The port currently has about $2.4 million in cash reserves, and maintains a minimum cash reserve of $1.35 million, said Port Finance/Administration Director Al Starns.