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'No chance' of Miracle on the Strait of Georgia; YVR needs a new hovercraft, says critical Tory MP

If an incident similar to last week's crash-landing of US Airways Flight 1549 in New York City's Hudson River happened in the waters off Vancouver International Airport, would we be able to tell the same miraculous survival story?

John Cummins, a former B.C. commercial fisherman and current Conservative MP for Delta-Richmond East, doesn't think so.

"The bottom line is that if the New York incident had happened in the waters and mudflats off YVR there would have been a tragic loss of life," he says.

In New York, the US Airways Airbus A320 suffered a suspected double bird strike on leaving LeGuardia Airport, then ditched in the Hudson River with all 155 on board subsequently being rescued.

YVR is also on a major migratory flyway, where aircraft bird-strikes are common.

Cummins has raised these concerns before but says last week's "Miracle on the Hudson River," in which many boats were available to assist immediately, has placed the local issue back on a front burner.

As it stands, two rescue hovercraft are stationed at YVR, but Cummins says the backup vessel is old, obsolete and unable to operate effectively in the more severe winds and high seas common to Georgia Strait in winter.

The primary vessel is the 28-metre Siya, built in Canada 11 years ago. Cummins says this hovercraft is well-powered and, most importantly, has a bow ramp to accommodate large numbers of people.

However, the second vessel is the 25-year-old Penac, bought used from the U.K. by the Canadian government in 2004.

Cummins says this 25-metre vessel is underpowered and that federal government documents show that it cannot operate in some of the most extreme local winter marine conditions.

Nor is the newer Siya always available for YVR rescue work at Sea Island, because it is sometimes called on for other duties, he adds.

In this regard, the Canadian Coast Guard has been under the jurisdiction of Fisheries and Oceans Canada since 1995.

"By placing the coast guard into Fisheries, the government was trying to achieve more efficient use of all the vessels, but it's not been a good fit and it hasn't really worked," Cummins notes.

He first raised a red flag on this issue when the older Penac was purchased by Ottawa.

"We paid about \$9 million for this used hovercraft, that already had 14,000 operating hours on it, when we could have purchased a new one from a manufacturer in Seattle for about \$10 million," he says.

But what still irritates the maverick Tory MP is that, while the coast guard was buying this well-used hovercraft in the U.K. for the West Coast, it was paying \$23.4 million to purchase a new hovercraft to serve in Quebec.

However, coast guard spokesman Dan Bate counters that the Penac was thoroughly refurbished after its purchase. He says it currently meets all the agency's needs and won't be replaced anytime soon.

Cummins disagrees.

"It's time everyone faced the reality that YVR is not adequately protected," he says. "We have to rethink this issue and buy a new hovercraft."