



Port State Control: Friend or Foe?

Andy Madden | Published Jul 20, 2026

Port State Control is often viewed as an unwelcome interruption - an inspection that may expose deficiencies, delay operations, increase costs, or result in detention.

However, for a reputable organization that properly maintains its vessels, trains its crews, and provides strong support from the shore-based office, Port State Control should be respected - not feared.

At its best, the inspection process provides an independent set of eyes and an opportunity to confirm whether the vessel's documented systems accurately reflect its actual condition, operation, and onboard safety culture.

An Independent Set of Eyes

People working aboard a vessel or within a ship-management organization can become familiar with recurring defects, temporary arrangements, incomplete records, or accepted ways of working.

Over time, something that should attract attention may begin to appear normal.

- Maintenance weaknesses;
- Incomplete or inconsistent records;
- Gaps between written procedures and actual onboard practice;
- Crew-familiarity concerns;

- Deferred defects;
- Weaknesses in safety-management implementation; and
- Conditions that may create future operational, regulatory, insurance, or legal exposure.

Where a vessel is otherwise properly maintained and managed, inspection findings should not automatically be treated as criticism or failure. They may instead provide a valuable business-improvement opportunity.

The objective should not simply be to "pass" the inspection. The more useful question is what the inspection reveals about the vessel, its systems, and the effectiveness of the company's management and oversight.

Never Lie to an Inspector

Never lie to the inspector.

A crew member, superintendent, manager, or shore-based representative may believe that minimizing a deficiency, changing an explanation, withholding information, or providing an inaccurate answer is protecting the vessel or helping the company.

It is not.

A technical deficiency may be explained and corrected. A maintenance failure may be investigated. An incomplete record may be reviewed and clarified.

However, once an inspector believes that information has been intentionally concealed or that an answer is deliberately misleading, the nature of the matter can change significantly.

Credibility, once lost, is difficult to restore.

The inspector may then question other records, statements, certificates, procedures, and management representations. What began as an isolated technical issue can develop into a broader examination of the vessel's safety-management system and the company's safety culture.

In many cases, the attempted concealment becomes more serious than the original deficiency.

False Statements to the USCG

The consequences may be particularly serious during a United States Coast Guard inspection or marine casualty investigation.

Under 18 U.S.C. § 1001, a person may face federal prosecution for knowingly and willfully making a materially false statement, concealing a material fact through a scheme or device, or knowingly using a materially false document in a matter within the jurisdiction of the United States Government.

A person may believe that an inaccurate statement protects the master, the crew, the vessel, or the company. In reality, it may transform a manageable inspection finding into a potential federal criminal matter.

A deficiency may be correctable. A deliberate lie to a USCG officer may become a federal offense.

Be Honest - but Do Not Over-Offer

Honesty does not require crew members to volunteer every fact, opinion, or assumption that may be remotely connected to the inspection.

- Answer the question asked truthfully and directly;
- Provide the records properly requested;
- Never intentionally conceal relevant information; and
- Avoid unnecessary speculation, assumptions, or unrelated details.

Listen carefully to the question. Answer from your own knowledge. Do not guess. Do not speculate. Do not attempt to provide an answer merely because you believe the inspector expects one.

"I do not know, but I will confirm and provide the correct information."

That response is far better than improvising an explanation that later proves inaccurate.

Personnel should also avoid over-explaining. Unrequested information can create confusion, introduce inconsistencies, and unnecessarily expand the scope of the inspection.

Do not over-offer information - but never intentionally conceal, alter, fabricate, or mislead.

Records Must Reflect Reality

Inspectors routinely compare the vessel's physical condition with its logbooks, maintenance records, permits, risk assessments, certificates, procedures, and safety-management documentation.

The paperwork must reflect what is actually happening aboard the vessel.

A completed checklist does not correct an outstanding defect. A maintenance entry does not prove that the work was properly performed. A written procedure has limited value where the crew does not understand it or where actual onboard practice is materially different.

Inconsistencies between the vessel's condition and its records may cause greater concern than the original deficiency because they can suggest weaknesses in reporting, supervision, verification, or management oversight.

The strongest inspection preparation is not the last-minute completion of checklists. It is consistent and transparent vessel management.

Inspection Readiness Should Be Continuous

A vessel should be maintained and operated as though an inspection could take place at any time.

- Defects are reported, assessed, tracked, and corrected;
- Temporary repairs are controlled and documented;
- Maintenance records accurately reflect the work performed;

- Crew members understand their duties and emergency responsibilities;
- Procedures correspond with actual onboard practice;
- Statutory and class records remain current and readily available; and
- Known deficiencies are not hidden or repeatedly deferred without proper review.

For a reputable organization that maintains its vessels properly, trains its crews effectively, and provides strong support from the shore-based office, Port State Control inspections should be respected - but they should not be feared.

Inspection readiness should be the result of normal vessel operation, not a temporary condition created shortly before arrival in port.

Fatigue, Rest Hours, and Inspection Timing

Inspection readiness should never come at the expense of the crew's required rest.

The Maritime Labour Convention and the STCW framework contain important safeguards concerning hours of work and rest. The general minimum-rest standard is 10 hours of rest in any 24-hour period and 77 hours in any seven-day period.

A vessel may arrive in port following extended pilotage, maneuvering, cargo preparation, machinery operations, security duties, or other demanding work.

If Port State Control officers attend immediately afterward, the master, officers, engineers, and crew members needed for the inspection may already be exhausted.

That situation should not simply be ignored.

The master or company representative should respectfully discuss the circumstances with the attending officers. Where appropriate, they should explain the recent operational demands, identify the personnel required to participate, and ask whether the attendance can be delayed or rescheduled to allow the crew to receive proper rest.

The decision ultimately rests with the Port State Control authority. There may also be circumstances in which immediate attendance is necessary because of a safety, security, pollution, casualty, or compliance concern.

Nevertheless, raising a genuine fatigue issue demonstrates that the vessel and company take crew welfare, regulatory compliance, and safe operations seriously.

It may also allow rested officers and crew members to retrieve records, explain systems, demonstrate equipment, communicate accurately, and put the vessel's best foot forward during the inspection.

Attempting to proceed with exhausted personnel can result in poor communication, incomplete answers, avoidable errors, and the appearance that the crew lacks familiarity with the vessel.

A reputable operator should never falsify rest-hour records or pressure fatigued personnel to create an artificial appearance of compliance.

Protecting rest hours demonstrates care for the crew and supports a safer, more accurate, and more professional inspection.

Learn from the Findings

A constructive vessel manager should look beyond the immediate correction of an individual deficiency.

- Why did the deficiency arise?
- Why was it not identified internally?
- Was it an isolated issue or evidence of a wider trend?
- Could the same condition exist elsewhere in the fleet?
- Was the cause related to training, supervision, maintenance planning, procurement, workload, manning, or shore-based support?
- Does the written procedure reflect what is realistically achievable aboard the vessel?
- What corrective action will prevent recurrence?

This is where an inspection becomes more than a compliance exercise.

It becomes an opportunity to improve reliability, strengthen safety performance, reduce detention risk, protect the crew, and limit future operational, insurance, regulatory, and legal exposure.

Friend or Foe?

Port State Control is not inherently the enemy.

For a properly maintained vessel, it can provide independent assurance that the vessel and its management systems are functioning as intended.

For an unprepared vessel, it may reveal deficiencies that should already have been identified internally.

Where personnel attempt to conceal information or mislead the authorities, the inspection can quickly develop into something far more serious.

- Maintain the vessel.
- Train the crew.
- Support the ship from ashore.
- Respect required rest periods.
- Keep accurate records.
- Answer the question asked.
- Tell the truth.
- Do not guess or speculate.
- Do not over-offer.
- Never intentionally conceal or mislead.

As a maritime auditor, ship surveyor, and attorney, I have attended and witnessed dozens of Port State Control inspections around the world.

When approached constructively, an independent set of eyes can identify weaknesses before they develop into detentions, casualties, claims, or more serious regulatory concerns.

If your vessel requires Port State Control preparation, an independent readiness review, or assistance with an ongoing inspection, investigation, deficiency, detention, or compliance concern, please contact **A.M. Marine Surveys LLC** or **The Law Office of Andrew E. Madden, P.C.**

We provide practical support informed by maritime operational experience, auditing and surveying expertise, and legal insight.

For a well-managed ship, an inspection tests the system. For a poorly managed ship, it may reveal the problem. For a dishonest response, it may become the problem.

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