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CARICOM Secures Exemption From USTR Port Fees on China-Built Vessels Following Regionwide Advocacy

The Caribbean Private Sector Organisation credited CARICOM leaders, including PM Mia Mottley, for their united push to exempt Caribbean shipping from U.S. fees that could have raised costs and disrupted supply chains across the region.

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The Caribbean Private Sector Organisation (CPSO) has expressed gratitude to the Office of the United States Trade Representative (USTR) for its decision to exempt Caribbean shipping from newly proposed high port fees on China-built vessels, a move the CPSO says safeguards regional economies from inflation, supply chain disruptions, and surging trade costs.

The exemption, issued on April 17, follows a proposed USTR measure that would have imposed port fees in excess of US\$1 million per vessel call at U.S. ports for operators with China-built fleets. The CPSO warned the fees would have disproportionately impacted Caribbean shipping routes, potentially driving up shipping costs by an unsustainable margin while disrupting goods movement across the CARICOM region.

“This Determination...exempts Caribbean shipping from the high port fees,” CPSO stated in an official release. “These [fees] would have increased the cost of shipping between the Caribbean and the United States, with crippling consequences for inflation, shortages, delays, and other ‘supply chain’ disruptions for the people and the economies of CARICOM and the Caribbean.”

The exemption, the CPSO said, was the result of widespread collaboration among CARICOM Heads of Government, technical experts, industry leaders, and regional advocacy organizations. The group commended Prime Minister Mia Amor Mottley, who chairs CARICOM, for her leadership. Her advocacy—expressed both in communications to President Donald Trump and in a high-level meeting with U.S. Secretary of State Marco Rubio—was described as a “significant driver” of the successful outcome.

The CPSO also highlighted the role of its technical team, led by Dr. Patrick Antoine, in preparing detailed submissions and delivering testimony to USTR. The organization's March 18, 2025 coordination call, which drew more than 700 stakeholders across the region, marked the beginning of a regionwide effort to refine a united private-sector position.

CPSO emphasized that the USTR Panel, including officials from multiple U.S. government departments, demonstrated “openness and transparency,” showing a willingness to engage on the unique vulnerabilities of Caribbean trade.

“We credit the USTR and its panel...[for being] receptive to the issues peculiar to the Caribbean, introduced via the submissions made by and testimony of the CPSO and other Caribbean partners,” the statement noted.

The CPSO also acknowledged a broad network of partners and supporters, including:

- Tropical Shipping CEO Tim Martin and Jennifer Nugent-Hill, a Director on the CPSO–U.S. Business Council Executive
- Caribbean Hotel and Tourism Association (CHTA)
- Caribbean Tourism Organization (CTO)
- Seaboard Marine
- Atlantic Council
- Caribbean Shipping Association (CSA)

- Mr. Darwin Telemaque, CEO of Antigua Port Authority
- Mr. Gerard Bergasse, Regional Manager of Tropical Shipping
- Port Management Association of the Caribbean (PMAC)

CARICOM Secretariat representatives Ambassador Wayne McCook, Assistant Secretary-General for the Single Market and Trade, and Dr. Wendell Samuel, Assistant Secretary-General (Ag) for Economic Integration, Innovation and Development, were also credited for their critical coordination roles.

CPSO praised the involvement of Congresswoman Stacey Plaskett, who represents the U.S. Virgin Islands. Plaskett joined the CPSO, Tropical Shipping, and CARICOM Ambassadors in a high-level briefing and also raised the issue strategically during hearings of the U.S. House Ways and Means Committee. “Her contribution was a significant contributor to the USTR outcome,” the CPSO stated.

The CPSO specifically advocated for three key exemptions:

1. Short sea shipping — defined as routes within 2,750 nautical miles from CARICOM to the continental U.S.; USTR ultimately approved a 2,000-mile exemption, deemed acceptable by CPSO.
2. Smaller vessels — under 55,000 deadweight tons and under 4,999 TEUs; USTR approved exemption for vessels under 55,000 DWT and under 4,000 TEUs, also acceptable.
3. Specialized cargo — such as chemical and energy transport exceeding 55,000 DWT; USTR granted exemption for bulk capacities up to 80,000 DWT and for specialized vessels.

CPSO Chairman, in closing remarks, extended thanks to CARICOM media, the Caucus of CARICOM Ambassadors in Washington, and the over 5,500 members of the CPSO, calling the outcome a “proud moment” for the regional private sector. He pledged continued advocacy on related matters, including the impact of U.S. tariffs on CARICOM trade.

“We were honoured to be pressed into the service of the people of the Community on such a significant issue at such a critical time,” the CPSO concluded.

Dr. Antoine and his team, the organization added, continue to play a strategic role alongside the CARICOM Secretariat as the region now shifts its attention to broader trade issues.