

Aleutians oil spill risk targeted

ALEX DEMARBAN, The Cordova Times

September 17, 2009

Two global risk-management companies will develop options for reducing the possibility of an oil spill in the Aleutian Islands.

Environmental Resources Management, founded in the United Kingdom, and Det Norske Veritas, based in Oslo, Norway, will team up and report late next year on such information as oil-spill likelihood and traffic levels, said Gary Folley, the state's oil spill response manager for the Aleutians.

They'll also consider such prevention measures as escort tugs for ships, a radar system, and traffic lanes that keep vessels away from sensitive areas, he said.

The report is part of a multi-pronged effort to prevent another spill from harming ocean resources and damaging local economies as large ships traverse the chain as part of the Great Circle shipping route linking Asia to North America.

The companies were hired in early September by the Aleutian Islands Risk Assessment Team, said Folley, the state's representative to the team.

That same week in Unalaska, tugs and a Coast Guard cutter and helicopter practiced rescuing a ship in distress, as part of an emergency tow system there.

The assessment team, which also includes the U.S. Coast Guard and the National Fish and Wildlife Foundation, was formed after the grounding of the Selendang Ayu in 2004. The 738-foot freighter struck the coast off Unalaska Island, spilling about 340,000 gallons of heavy fuel.

A 2007 traffic study estimated that 4,300 vessels pass through Unimak Pass near the end of the Alaska Peninsula every year, said Leslie Pearson, of Pearson Consulting LLC in Steilacoom, Wash. and a former state spill response manager.

Additional freighters may not use the pass, but instead might follow a southern route that takes them below the Aleutians, she said.

The traffic number will be updated as part of the report, with experts using new monitoring stations to track the ships traveling along the Aleutians, said Folley.

Folley couldn't immediately say how much they'll receive for their work.

They'll be paid from a \$3 million fund that was part of the settlement money provided to the federal government by the Selendang's owners, IMC Group in Singapore.

After the companies release their report in December 2010, the assessment team will award another contract — not necessarily to the same companies — for another study providing more detailed information on the risk and threats of an oil spill, including such things as impact on wildlife and the environment, he said.

The new contractors who will complete the current study flew to Unalaska in early September to meet the team's advisory panel, which includes stakeholders such as marine pilots and the city of

Unalaska, said Folley. **Emergency tow drill** The three-day meeting that began Sept. 1 included an emergency tow system drill, the third in three years.

Participants say Unalaska Mayor Shirley Marquardt launched the effort to create the tow system in 2007, shortly after the near-grounding of the 443-foot Salica Frigo on Hog Island.

A spill from that ship could have devastated subsistence and commercial fisheries in Unalaska and shut down shipping, to mention a couple of the consequences, she said.

“I said that’s it, I’m done. I’m sick and tired of cleaning up oil,” she said.

Several organizations, including the Alaska Marine Pilots and state and federal agencies, offered resources and ideas to develop the system, said Marquardt.

It includes synthetic, light-weight tow lines that won’t freeze, a lighted buoy, a simple manual that can be placed on freighters and a firing gun to shoot the tow line from a tug to a distressed ship, she said.

After the city of Unalaska purchased the equipment for about \$30,000, the state created a similar system to handle the largest vessels, said Marquardt.

The gear is stored in Unalaska and can be deployed from a tug boat or dropped from a helicopter.

The two systems were created in part with the Salica Frigo in mind, Marquardt said.

The freighter’s crew couldn’t fire a line to the tug because the firing gun had not been properly maintained and was too damp, she said. And it couldn’t haul a tow line off the water because it was frozen and heavy.

The most important part of the system is the training, she said.

The latest drill involved a practice rescue of the M/V Dinok that included the Coast Guard Cutter Alex Haley, the tugs Gyrfalcon and the James Dunlap, port officers and others.

“This is not a silver bullet,” she said. “We can’t guarantee that we’ll always have a successful outcome, because we know there are far too many factors, mechanical failure, human error, sea state.

“But what we do know is we now have the tools and the training that we’ve never had before to increase the chances of a successful response to a distressed vessel. And we’ve also raised the safety bar for our guys on those tugs who respond.”