

## **Anchorage Daily News Editorial**

### **Aleutian spill**

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New report offers good ideas for better protecting a vulnerable area The Alaska Oceans Program has done a great service with its report on the Selendang Ayu oil spill in the Aleutians last December. The analysis, by veteran marine transportation expert Walter Parker, is the first comprehensive look at ways to protect one of the world's richest and most vulnerable marine environments from the hazards posed by heavy international shipping traffic.

Mr. Parker knows whereof he speaks. The World War II Navy veteran chaired the Alaska Oil Spill Commission that investigated the Exxon Valdez spill and was influential in subsequent reforms. He also led the state technical team that oversaw planning for the trans-Alaska pipeline, including tanker access and safety questions. Mr. Parker's report on the Selendang should prompt an official U.S. government review that produces recommendations for strengthening today's skeletal shipping safety net in the region.

As the Selendang Ayu spill demonstrated, this is a part of the world where environmental stakes are high and risks are substantial. The Aleutian Islands carve a swath through seas that brim with marine life. Some 450 species of fish and underwater animals inhabit the waters. More than 200 species of birds live there or migrate through, along with 25 kinds of marine mammals. Fishing in the region is a \$1 billion a year industry. The Selendang spill hit that industry hard, halting some crab fishing and oiling 11 salmon streams.

This ecological treasure is also a busy shipping route. Some 2,700 vessels a year sail the Aleutian arc between Asia and the west coast of North America. A relative handful are oil tankers and barges, but all carry large amounts of engine fuel that can spill in a mishap.

And there are mishaps aplenty. Since 1990, there have been 460 "marine casualties" out there, according to the Parker report. It's as if a major truck route ran through Denali National Park, and every year or two a truck rolled off the road, triggering a significant wildfire.

When a marine mishap dumps oil into Aleutian waters, it hits an ecosystem that's already under stress. The area's Steller sea lions and short-tailed albatrosses are endangered species. Populations of northern fur seals and sea otters have plummeted. Once-common seabirds are experiencing mysterious declines. The Aleutians are an

area where it's critical to get the right level of environmental protection. It's long past the time for action to ensure safer shipping in this vulnerable area.

The Parker report recaps the now-familiar cascade of errors that produced the Selendang Ayu grounding. What's new is the in-depth look at the complex web of state, federal and international shipping safety rules, with suggestions for changes that will deliver stronger protection.

In dealing with oil spills, of course, the overriding goal has to be prevention: keeping oil from ever hitting the water in the first place. Some kind of systematic vessel tracking is essential, so news of trouble can quickly reach authorities. Stationing one or more rescue tugs in the region also would make a huge difference. (Several vessels tried to aid the Selendang; none were powerful enough to cope with such a large ship in storm-lashed seas.)

Once oil hits the water, containment and cleanup in the area's often stormy seas is a huge challenge. But it's not a hopeless battle, according to the Parker report. Surveying state-of-the-art booms and skimmers, the report says they have a lot more potential than the equipment now staged in the region. The report strongly urges a complete reworking of spill contingency plans, especially the liberal exemptions now accorded ships that don't stop in the area's ports.

Upgrading the area's marine safety net won't be cheap, and finding money is always a challenge. The report notes, however, that both the federal and state governments already have spill response funds that might be opened to investments in prevention.

Every so often, a headline-grabbing marine disaster focuses attention on Alaska's Aleutians. As the Selendang Ayu showed, it's a rich and vulnerable environment that requires a higher level of protection. The Parker report should spur the state and federal governments into action to help prevent future disasters.

**BOTTOM LINE:** Ship traffic in the Aleutians produces too many disasters that threaten the ecologically rich region. The Parker report should prod new protection.