

## **Bering Sea ships at risk, study says** **GROUP'S REPORT: Government agencies ill-equipped for troubles.**

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Federal and state agencies are ill-equipped and unprepared to respond to oil spills and vessels in distress in a part of the Bering Sea heavily trafficked by huge international freighters, container ships and at least a few oil tankers, according to a report commissioned by an environmental organization and released Wednesday.

Bigger, stronger tugboats, better vessel tracking, more effective spill-response equipment and tougher laws regulating international vessels that transit the Great Northern Route through the Aleutian Islands are needed to protect important fisheries and sensitive marine habitat, the report says. Vessels traveling between the U.S. West Coast and Asia follow the route, which slices through the Aleutians at Unimak Pass and at Shemya.

The report was produced by Parker Associates, a firm headed by Walter Parker, who chaired the commission appointed to investigate the 1989 Exxon Valdez spill, and released by the Alaska Ocean Program, which is funded in part by the Alaska Conservation Foundation. The principal investigator and author is Tom Lakosh, a persistent oil spill critic and advocate for stronger regulations.

It offers a blistering appraisal of the grounding of the freighter Selendang Ayu on Unalaska Island in December, faulting the U.S. Coast Guard and the Alaska Department of Environmental Conservation for failing to have adequate equipment and response vessels staged in the area, and for offering ineffective assistance when the 738-foot freighter, without power, drifted for two days until it broke apart on the west coast of Unalaska.

"Spill response to this incident must be considered a near total disaster where no spilled oil was contained at the grounding site and no oil was recovered on the water," the report says. "Virtually no attempt was made to recover oil on the water for the months that oil was still leaking from the ship in recoverable quantities, even when sea conditions were very favorable to such efforts.

"Spill recovery equipment available in the region was wholly insufficient and inappropriate for ocean conditions."

A Coast Guard spokeswoman said officers authorized to respond to the report were not available Wednesday. Officials with the state Department of Environmental Protection, however, said the report's account of spill response efforts is incomplete, inaccurate and misinformed.

"When it says, 'virtually no attempt was made to recover oil on the water,' that's just incorrect," said Gary Folley, DEC's on-scene coordinator for the effort. "We did have two heavy oil, viscous oil, skimmers in place in Unalaska. ... The problem was when the vessel grounded it broke apart in fairly rapid order."

Some storm-driven oil quickly washed ashore on nearby beaches, he said. Heavy seas also broke spilled oil into golf-ball-sized tar chunks that sank in the water column, "so it didn't exist in the form of surface slicks that traditional skimmers can pick up."

Folley said DEC rightly focused on protecting fisheries and fishing boats that travel into Dutch Harbor. "In this case, the fisheries impact was the No. 1 potential impact in my book. These fisheries are huge, a huge part of the economy," he said.

In an interview Wednesday night, Lakosh said situation reports filed by DEC and the Coast Guard indicate that oil sporadically leaked from the broken freighter for weeks after the Dec. 8 grounding.

"It was leaking in significant quantities into February, when a slick a quarter-mile long was reported by NOAA," Lakosh said. "There was no attempt to recover oil on the water even under favorable conditions."

Parker said the report's most significant finding "is that both the Coast Guard and the state DEC failed to recognize that vessel traffic in the chain has increased dramatically in the last 10 years, and promises to increase more, and spill response out there is still geared toward fishing vessels and villages, what exists locally out there."

Parker and Rick Steiner, a marine biology professor at the University of Alaska who is familiar with the report, said Lakosh's research underscores the primary need for better tracking of vessels transiting the Aleutians, more powerful tugboats and Coast Guard equipment capable of controlling the huge freighters and container vessels when something goes wrong.

"A vessel tracking system is No. 1," Steiner said: "Where they are, where they came from, what's on board ... You'd think just from a Homeland Security standpoint, we'd want to know that."

Gov. Frank Murkowski cited a need for Coast Guard vessels with better towing capabilities soon after the Selendang Ayu crashed, and again in an April 8 letter asking Adm. Thomas Collins, the Coast Guard commandant, to deploy more powerful cutters to some Alaska ports.

"There have been some recent incidents in Alaskan waters that resulted in oil and fuel spills due to vessels going aground which may have been prevented if the USCG cutters had the appropriate towing capabilities that they were once equipped with," wrote Murkowski, who added that the Coast Guard began eliminating heavy towing capabilities from cutters in the 1970s.

"While that may have been the right thing to do in the continental United States, here in Alaska we have very few ships or tugs available with large vessel towing capabilities available in our ports," Murkowski said.

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