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Selendang Ayu report critical of Alaska and Coast Guard
by Jason Moore - Wednesday, July 13, 2005

Anchorage, Alaska - A new report out on the grounding of the freighter Selendang Ayu on Unalaska Island is critical of Alaska and the U.S. Coast Guard. The report, funded by the Alaska Conservation Foundation, says the Coast Guard and the Department of Environmental Conservation failed to adequately prepare for such an incident.



KTUU File

The freighter Selendang Ayu grounded and broke apart on Unalaska Island in December, losing 335,000 gallons of fuels. It was the largest spill in Alaska waters since the Exxon Valdez grounding in 1989.

A new report on the incident faults the U.S. Coast Guard and the Alaska DEC for not doing more to prevent it. University of Alaska professor Rick Steiner says the report substantiates the claims he has been making since the mishap.



Barry Johnson/KTUU-TV

“In the Aleutians we’ve got about 10 cargo vessels going through there everyday and not one competent ocean rescue tug in the system anywhere,” said Steiner (left).

The Selendang Ayu’s route is used frequently by ships traveling between the Pacific Northwest and the Far East. The Selendang drifted for two days without power before it grounded.

Steiner says had the federal and state responders been doing their jobs, it would have been better prepared for such an incident. However, officials with the state DEC say the report contains inaccuracies, and they say the conclusions are premature.

“The national transportation safety board report is not out yet. So to draw conclusions about the tugs or escort assistance that we might need out there without knowing the circumstances from the formal investigation report and findings is premature, at best,” said Larry Dietrich of the DEC.



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Dietrich says once the freighter broke apart the response was exemplary, using a costly helicopter operation to remove more than 140,000 gallons of oils from the ship and working to

protect local spawning grounds. In response to the spill, the U.S. Coast Guard is now doing a risk assessment which could lead to more assets placed along the Aleutian Islands to prevent a similar accident in the future.

Rick Steiner supports the risk assessment, and says it should have been done before the beaches of Unalaska suffered the damage in December.

“We can't drive the risk to zero. Everybody knows that. But we can bring 70 to 80 percent of it out of the system with very feasible, off the shelf, cost effective technologies that we know about,” said Steiner.

But state officials say even if large tugs were in place at the time, the harsh weather and massive size of the ship may not have changed the ultimate outcome.

Dietrich says while the risk assessment for the Aleutian chain has begun, it could be delayed since assets with the U.S. Coast Guard have been diverted to the homeland security measures.