



http://seattlepi.nwsourc.com/local/232348_freighter13.html

Big changes urged to avert spills
Report on Aleutian oil disaster says not enough being done
Wednesday, July 13, 2005
By LISA STIFFLER
SEATTLE POST-INTELLIGENCER REPORTER

Dramatic improvements need to be made to prevent another oil spill like the one last winter that damaged pristine Alaskan shorelines, according to a report being released today.

The first independent report on the December spill in the Aleutian Islands concluded that bigger, more powerful tugboats need to be purchased and stationed in the area, more sophisticated cleanup equipment should be available, and vessels passing through the ecologically sensitive waters need to be tracked by the Coast Guard.

"The take-home overall message is that the activity in the Bering Sea is increasing dramatically and there has been no sign that the spill response even comes close to matching it," said Walter Parker, owner of Parker Associates Inc., the consulting company that prepared the report.

The 57-page study was funded by Alaska Oceans Program, an organization that funds marine conservation activities in the North Pacific.

"We ought to be thinking more about making sure these kinds of things don't happen, and I don't think we're investing in prevention in the way that we should and could," said Mark Spalding of Alaska Oceans.

On Dec. 6, the Selendang Ayu, a China-bound freighter loaded with soybeans, experienced mechanical troubles in the waters near Dutch Harbor. The crew shut down the engines to make repairs, but was unable to restart them.

Two days later, in stormy weather, the 738-foot Malaysian ship went aground near Unalaska, breaking in two and spilling its cargo and about 335,000 gallons of heavy fuel and diesel.

Six crew members were killed in an attempt to rescue them from the ship by helicopter. Miles of shoreline and salmon streams in the Alaska Maritime National Wildlife Refuge were fouled, and more than 1,600 seabirds died.

Response to the accident and spill has cost more than \$49 million so far, according to the report, and that figure could double as the cleanup continues.

The Coast Guard is interested in looking into a better system for responding to problems in the Aleutians, said Cmdr. Chris Myskowski of the Marine Safety Division in Juneau, Alaska.

"We definitely would support a risk study of the Aleutians," he said yesterday. "I think that would be the first step."

Responsibility for spill response is shared with the Alaska Department of Environmental Conservation. Gary Folley, acting program manager for prevention and emergency response, declined to comment on the report yesterday, saying he needs more time to review it.

The Coast Guard and the National Transportation Safety Board are continuing to investigate the accident.

In June, a bill to keep a national oil spill cleanup fund afloat was introduced in Congress. The legislation would reinstate a 5-cents-a-barrel tax paid by oil companies for petroleum produced in the United States or imported here. It would raise the cap for the Oil Spill Liability Trust Fund from its current value of \$1 billion to \$3 billion.

The Coast Guard recently installed a vessel-tracking system in the Aleutians, but its range still would not have been far enough to have detected the adrift Selendang Ayu. Critics are pushing for a satellite system that would be able to track remote ships.

The captain of the freighter waited 15 hours before alerting authorities. In March, he admitted to investigators that he lied about when he shut down the engines, and that he had doctored the ship's log. Two tugs were sent to the aid of the Selendang before it went aground. One got a cable attached to the vessel and was able to keep it offshore until the line broke.

"There was time with this ship -- if there had been equipment -- to get it into port before the storm hit it," Spalding said. "If we had been monitoring it better, we would have had even more time."

The report also found that efforts to contain the spill around the vessel could have been better. It criticized the failure to effectively protect shoreline and sensitive streams with oil-absorbent boom.

High seas and freezing temperatures made it difficult to get near the vessel, said Myskowski, of the Coast Guard. "I don't know if it would have mattered how much equipment we had."

P-I reporter Lisa Stiffler can be reached at 206-448-8042 or lisastiffler@seattlepi.com.