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## Increased Coast Guard capabilities sought for Aleutians

The Aleutian Islands Risk Assessment Panel continues to meet to hammer out the best approach of avoiding disasters like the Malaysian cargo ship Selendang Ayu, carrying a cargo of soybeans, went aground off the coast of Unalaska Island after its main engine failed resulting in the deaths of six crew members and spilling 335,732 gallons of diesel.

"The AIRA meeting of March 17 was to refine the final list of risk reduction options for the advisory panels draft recommendations," said Unalaska Mayor Shirley Marquardt. "We have been fleshing out a host of physical and administrative options in order to significantly and effectively reduce the risk of spills or their severity if they occur.

"Our primary goal is avoidance of a spill in the first place, but we agree that it is important to plan for the reduction of severity in a spill as well."

The Study for Accident Scenarios and Causality as well as the Spill Consequence Analysis Report paved the way for the draft risk reduction options, recommendations and descriptions, she said.

The draft recommendations document notes that presence of Coast Guard vessels and their towing capability have proven to be valuable during Bering Sea and Pacific Ocean incidents by rescuing and towing numerous fishing vessels and freighters up to 46,000 tons, and arresting the drift of other larger vessels until larger commercial assets can reach the scene. The panels see the need to maintain or increase Coast Guard patrols coverage and emergency towing capability in the Aleutian Islands. In order to do so, the panel recommends that the Coast Guard: \* Evaluate the feasibility and cost to install a modern automatic towing machine/winch (automatic tensioning and longer towline) on the Alex Haley, which has 6,800 horsepower and 60-ton bollard pull, that can provide better towing capability. Bollard pull is a value that allows the comparison of the pulling force of watercraft. \* Replace the soon-to-be decommissioned Acushnet with a vessel that has towing capability similar or better than the upgraded Alex Haley, and maximize patrol time in the Bering Sea/Aleutian region. Consider a vessel similar in capacity to the U.S. Navy ATF 166 Powhatan class ocean tugs that have a 75-ton bollard pull. \* Evaluate the current towing packages onboard all cutters in Alaska and upgrade their technology, such as with lightweight, floating towlines. Other than the Alex Haley, no other cutter has this capability. \* Consider establishing the Aleutian Islands and surrounding areas as a Particularly Sensitive Sea Area under the International Maritime Organization, as the area is impacted by international shipping. Minimally, protective measures should be put in place such as identifying areas to be avoided, mandatory ship routing, mandatory ship reporting and traffic separation scheme for Unimak Pass.

### Solving for short term

The panel is focusing on recommendations that can be implemented with little or no red tape.

"We believe that there are some RROs that could be put into action in the short term as they don't require complex legislative rule making or require significant financial support, like enhancing towing capabilities on Coast Guard cutters and staging more emergency towing systems along the chain toward Shemya," Marquardt said. "Others, such as an application to the IMO for the designation of a Particularly Sensitive Sea Area, could take several years to accomplish as they are thoroughly judged on the basis of relevant science, technical, economic and environmental information regarding the area at risk of damage from international shipping activities."

Marquardt pointed to the danger of vessels trying to make better time by sailing through passes have not been updated on nautical charts.

"In this case, it is a matter of ships transiting the Great Circle Route who may be taking short cuts through passes that do not have up-to-date or complete charts," she said. "The desire to increase rescue tug capability in the region is a good one, but comes with significant challenges regarding annual funding, home port and capability that must be addressed for success."

Maintaining and improving U.S. Coast Guard towing capabilities in the Bering Sea is imperative for mitigating the risk of drift groundings.



The Coast Guard Cutter Bertholf, a 418-foot National Security Cutter homeported in Alameda, Calif., sails into Juneau's Gasteneau Channel on April 10. The NSCs, part of the Coast Guard's Deepwater major-acquisition program, will be the flagships of the Coast Guard fleet and will replace the 378-foot, Hamilton-class High endurance Cutters, which entered service during the 1960s. - Courtesy Photo, Walter Shinn, U.S. Coast Guard

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Currently, the Acushnet is scheduled to be decommissioned in 2011, and there is no replacement, thus reducing patrol coverage in the Bering Sea. Replacing the Acushnet with a vessel similar to the Alex Haley will maintain and potentially increase ship time and coverage. The towing equipment onboard the cutters needs to be evaluated and upgraded to the best available technology, according to the Aleutian Island Risk Assessment draft recommendations.

"The challenges to reduce risk and provide better protection for the vessels that transit the Aleutian Island Chain and our marine waters are numerous and made somewhat more complex by the sheer distance between the passes and the unpredictability of severe weather much of the year combined with the prospect of a vessel's mechanical failure," Marquardt said. "As we move forward we continue to ask if the RRO is practical, effective and meets the goal of reducing risk in one of the riskiest and busiest marine environments on the planet."

On April 9, the 418-foot Coast Guard Cutter Bertholf visited Juneau on its maiden voyage into Alaska waters. For two months, it will conduct fishery boardings and search and rescue with stops in Juneau, Kodiak and Dutch Harbor.

"It is exciting to have the Bertholf in Alaskan waters from April to June,"

Rear Adm. Christopher Colvin, Coast Guard 17th District commander, said in a news release. "We look forward to learning how this new class of cutter performs in Alaska's challenging maritime environment."

With capabilities for maritime homeland security, law enforcement and national defense missions, the Bertholf is the first of eight planned National Security Cutters commissioned to replace the aging 378-foot High Endurance Hamilton Class cutters that have been in service since the 1960s.

The cutter is named after the first commandant of the Coast Guard, Commodore Ellsworth P. Bertholf, who was part of the Overland Expedition that traveled more than 1,600 miles by dog sled, from Nunivak Island to Point Barrow, to rescue 265 whalers aboard eight whaling ships caught in Arctic ice during the winter of 1898.

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