

Aleutians shipping risks are being examined, but methodically

TALKING BACK TO THE DAILY NEWS

By LARRY DIETRICK

(Published: December 30, 2005)

The Anchorage Daily News editorial Dec. 12 demanded that the state and federal governments "skip the stalling and get going," on an Aleutian Islands risk assessment. The editorial claims the only thing that has been done is "talk." This is flat out wrong. The public deserves an accurate and fair characterization of the Selendang Ayu spill, its real impacts, the response, and a systematic and methodical assessment of the causes.

Less than one month after the Selendang Ayu grounded, the U.S. Coast Guard and state Department of Environmental Conservation joined forces to evaluate risks posed by merchant shipping through North Pacific waters, the Bering Sea Region and the Aleutians. A Vessel Traffic Study was completed in April 2005 to document vessel navigation routes, vessel casualty history, Aleutian ports of call, and fuel types and quantities carried on board that may pose risks. This study is critical to understanding risks posed by vessels transiting through the Aleutian Islands from North America's west coast to Asia.

To mitigate immediate risks, the Coast Guard funded 15 Automatic Identification System sites throughout Alaska, including a receiver at Scotch Cap on Unimak Island to monitor vessel traffic transiting Unimak Pass, and to get a more accurate vessel traffic count. This vessel tracking system provides an immediate, interim step to assist the Coast Guard's response to emergencies. The Coast Guard's goal is to install more systems along the Aleutian chain for even greater visibility of vessels transiting the Northern Great Circle Route.

With the traffic study complete, the next step in the risk assessment process will be to identify critical factors and specific actions to reduce risks. At the Coast Guard's request, the National Academy of Sciences Marine Board, composed of members at the cutting edge of maritime risk assessment, has agreed to ensure scientific rigor in the process. Appropriate maritime experts will also be engaged in identifying and assessing shipping risks and considering the full spectrum of potential mitigation measures such as: traffic routing; long-range vessel tracking; tug escorts; vessel traffic services; emergency towing packages; dedicated emergency towing/response tugs; navigation

aids, and other potential risk reduction measures. The governor's FY '07 budget includes funds for this next step.

The National Transportation Safety Board final report regarding what caused the Selendang Ayu grounding is critical to the risk assessment and must be taken into consideration before finally deciding on steps to further reduce risks. We cannot afford to have a risk assessment rife with faulty claims and conclusions based on simplistic analysis in the comfort of 20-20 hindsight. To claim that nothing is being done ignores reality. We have an obligation to ensure the risk assessment produces meaningful results.

When the NTSB report and risk assessment are completed, credible recommendations will be made. To leap to conclusions before then would be foolish. Alaska's shorelines need real protection, not a false sense of security.

Larry Dietrick is the director of the state's Department of Environmental Conservation, Division of Spill Prevention and Response.