



Arctic shipping is a disaster waiting to happen

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By RICK STEINER

When the Malaysian freighter Selendang Ayu grounded in the Aleutian Islands eight years ago this week, it was a tragic reminder of the risks of northern shipping. While in route from Seattle to China in a Bering Sea storm, the ship's engine failed. As it drifted toward shore, there were no adequate ocean tugs available to take it in-tow, and it grounded off Unalaska on Dec. 8, 2004. Six crewmen were lost, the vessel broke in half, and its entire cargo and 335,000 gallons of fuel spilled, killing thousands of seabirds and other wildlife, closing fisheries, and contaminating many miles of shoreline.

The tragedy was caused by a combination of human error, financial pressures, mechanical failure, and lax government oversight. For a time, the disaster focused attention the risks of northern shipping, but complacency quickly returned. Today, the Selendang disaster is all but forgotten, and with increasing ship traffic, the risk is now greater than ever.

Every day, some 10-20 large ships – container ships, bulk carriers, and tankers - travel the “great circle route” along the Aleutians. And as Arctic sea ice melts, traffic is increasing across the Arctic Ocean. This past summer, 46 ships transited the Northern Sea Route across the Russian arctic, a ten-fold increase since 2010, carrying mostly petroleum product such as diesel, jet fuel, gas condensate and LNG. The volume of oil and gas shipped on the Northern Sea Route is projected to reach 40 million tons annually by 2020. There is also increasing traffic in cruise ships and ships servicing arctic oil and gas facilities and mines.

This is risky business. These are large vessels, carrying hazardous fuel and cargo, sailing treacherous seas along ecologically sensitive shorelines, and with virtually no prevention or emergency response infrastructure along the way. Much of this traffic is foreign flagged, on “innocent passage,” with lower safety standards. And it all happens out-of-sight, out-of-mind of government regulators. Shipping brings invasive species, underwater noise, ship-strikes on marine mammals, and stack emissions. But as some of these vessels carry millions of gallons of heavy fuel, and tankers carry tens of millions of gallons of petroleum or chemicals, the greatest fear is a catastrophic spill.

In response to the Selendang disaster, the Shipping Safety Partnership called for comprehensive safety improvements for Aleutian and Arctic shipping - continuous ship-tracking, ocean rescue tugs, emergency tow packages, routing agreements, areas-to-be-avoided, increased liability, enhanced pilotage, better spill response equipment, increased funding, and risk assessments. A few of these (the “low-hanging fruit”) were implemented – additional tracking stations were built, portable tow packages are pre-staged, there is more funding and response equipment, an Arctic Marine Shipping Assessment was conducted, and an Aleutian risk assessment is underway.

But on overall safety, the glass is still one-quarter full, three-quarters empty. The system is far from secure. Ship tracking remains inadequate, and there are still no powerful ocean rescue tugs along these routes. By comparison, after Exxon Valdez, Prince William Sound now has eleven escort & response tugs for its tankers. In the Aleutians, a 2009 National Academy of Sciences report concluded: “None of the existing measures are adequate for responding to large vessels under severe weather conditions.”

Two areas of greatest concern are Unimak Pass (in the eastern Aleutians) and Bering Strait. As these areas support more marine mammals, seabirds, fish, crab, and overall productivity than virtually any other ocean ecosystem in the world, the risk is clear. One wrong turn or loss of power of a loaded tanker or freighter in these passes could lead to a major spill disaster. Both Unimak Pass and Bering Strait were recommended in 2009 for international designation as Particularly Sensitive Sea Areas and Marine National Monuments, but the government has yet to act.

All of the Shipping Safety Partnership's recommendations (above) should immediately be implemented across the Aleutian and Arctic routes, particularly continuous ship tracking and rescue tugs, and paid for with industry cargo fees. And, governments should make mandatory the international “Guidelines for Ships Operating in Arctic ice-covered Waters,” enhance search and rescue capacity, and establish Regional Citizens' Advisory Councils to oversee shipping.

Arctic shipping is a disaster waiting to happen. It's not if, but when and where it will occur. It could be tonight or years from now; it could be in Unimak Pass, Bering Strait, Novaya Zemlya, Baffin Island or Greenland. But it will happen. Arctic governments and the shipping industry need to get serious about reducing this risk as much as possible, and soon.

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