



Commentary

Shipping risks already threaten Aleutians; let's act now

Judy Miller | Dec 08, 2012



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It's axiomatic in the cleanup business that the best plan for dealing with an oil spill is to prevent one. But Alaska has thousands of vessels regularly passing by our shores that do not meet U.S. oil spill planning requirements.

Many of the vessels plying Alaska's waters are in what's known as "innocent passage," so they are not subject to U.S. spill law, the Oil Pollution Act of 1990. But other vessels need a realistic compliance option for their federally required vessel response plan, rather than the routinely issued waivers. Alaska lacks regulatory authority over most of them.

While some Alaskans focus on the potential impacts of newly opened Arctic marine routes, we are already at risk from vessels sailing the heavily trafficked North Pacific Great Circle Route through the Aleutian Islands.

There we depend entirely on luck -- hoping a vessel does not drift into the rocks, or that a rescue tug might be closer than a week's trip away.

The Aleutians present a logical starting point for Alaska to assist shippers in meeting their federal compliance requirements by cooperatively instituting spill prevention measures for *all* vessels. A section of the Oil Pollution Act allows for customized oil-spill response planning in remote locations such as the Aleutians. Many experts in Alaska misunderstand federal law.

They contend, were it not for the Oil Pollution Act, we could mandate volumes of equipment in the state's spill plan and it would magically appear.

That's not how it works. To have equipment, somebody subject to the state's authority, has to pay for it. Typically, spill-response tools are exclusively for the group that funds them. Few want to share.

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Coast Guard. The key tool is a tug powerful enough to hold a large vessel off the rocks in the event of propulsion or steering failure.

This proposal calls for non-innocent vessels sailing near the Aleutians to spend limited compliance dollars on prevention rather than caches of spill cleanup equipment. Of late, Alaska has discussed building icebreakers -- or lobbying the U.S. Coast Guard to build more of them. Better yet, Alaska could join the group, making the tug available for hire if a vessel runs into trouble in the area.

It is time for Alaska to have prevention protection from potential spills by thousands of vessels near the Aleutians. These ships with massive fuel tanks are regularly sailing by the fisheries, subsistence resources and shorelines of the Aleutian Islands. As the Arctic melts and new routes open, more vessels will be sailing along northern Alaskan shores, facing similar risks.

We need protection for Alaska's marine ecosystems. International shippers need a practical compliance plan to support. It is in the best interest of Alaskans and the shipping industry to

cooperatively initiate spill prevention services now. Prevention is a better compliance option than connexes full of cleanup gear, and a better solution for Alaska.

Judy Miller works independently in environmental regulatory compliance with expertise in the Oil Pollution Act of 1990. Starting with the Exxon Valdez spill, she has worked on several spills in Alaska and other areas for Gallagher Marine Systems, insurers and others.

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