Oil Spill Prevention

To ensure a maximum level of safety, the council reviews all aspects of the oil transportation system in Prince William Sound. These include operations of oil tankers and the Valdez Marine Terminal, oil spills and other incidents, and the adequacy and maintenance of the Coast Guard's Vessel Traffic Service.

Tanker Safety

Escort System

The heart of the system for preventing oil spills in Prince William Sound is the fleet of rescue and response tugs that accompany loaded tankers from Valdez to the Gulf of Alaska. Thanks to years of study and analysis, and considerable investment by the shipping industry, this system is widely considered among the best in the world. This fleet, operated by Crowley Maritime Corporation under contract to Alyeska's Ship Escort Response Vessel System, includes five state-of-the-art, 10,000-horsepower tugs that have demonstrated their capabilities in actual incidents and in various sea trials observed and reviewed by the council.

Federal law requires that loaded single-hull oil tankers be escorted by two tugs in Prince William Sound. The current practice is for double-hull tankers to have double escorts as well. However, it's unclear what will happen with the tanker fleet's transition to double-hull vessels. (The last single hulled-tanker left the Valdez oil trade in the summer of 2009 and is not expected to return.) Consequently, the use of double escorts will hinge on voluntary compliance and on state-level requirements unless federal law is changed. The council is concerned that the tanker companies may propose to reduce the escort and response system now that mandatory requirements are sunsetting.

The council position on escorts, adopted in 2007, calls for preserving the two-tug requirement.

The council's efforts to preserve the dual-tug escort system took significant steps forward in the past year. In early 2009, the Alaska House and Senate unanimously passed resolutions in favor of maintaining the escort system after the federal requirement sunsets in 2015.

In May 2009, Alaska's U.S. senators, Lisa Murkowski and Mark Begich, introduced federal legislation to preserve the escort system. Their bill would amend the Oil Pollution Act to place double-hulled tankers under the same dual-escort requirement that already covers single-hull tankers.

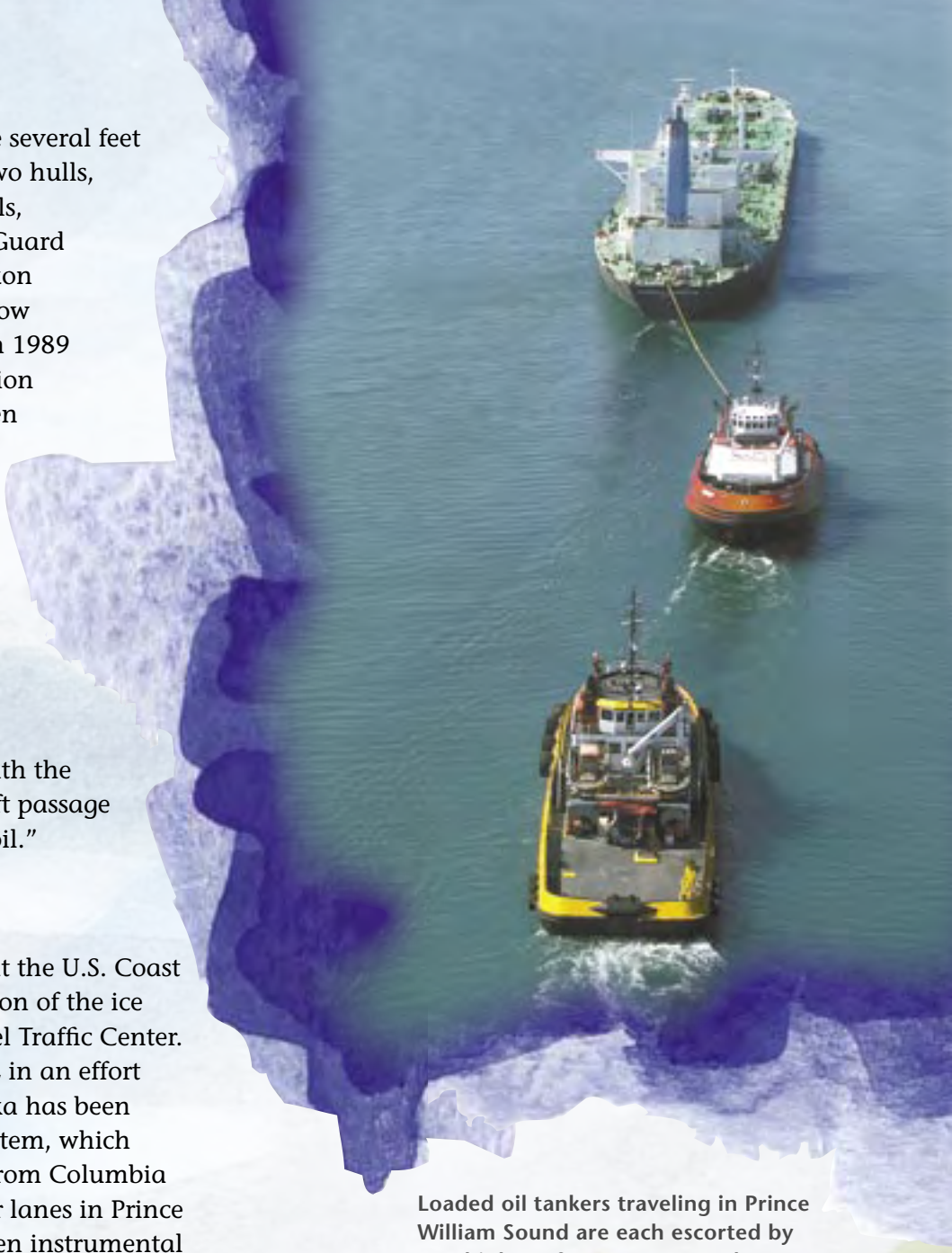
"The current oil transport system in Prince William Sound is one of the safest in the world," Murkowski said in a prepared statement after introducing the bill. "While I recognize that double-hulled tankers are an improvement over single hulls, they will not, by themselves, prevent oil spills. Even with double hulled tankers, we must not compromise the existing safety system which has been so successful. We must remain ever vigilant and not forget the devastation that the Exxon Valdez oil spill caused."

"The dual escort coverage of tankers operating in Prince William Sound has helped ensure we have the best oil transportation system in the world," Begich said. "The tractor tugs have proved their usefulness several times when tankers needed assistance. Their continued use is inexpensive insurance to protect the environment of Prince William Sound and maintain the flow of oil."

Alaska Congressman Don Young worked with his fellow members of the U.S. House Committee on Transportation and Infrastructure on a House version of this provision.

Double-hulled tankers, which have several feet of protective space between their two hulls, can prevent or reduce some oil spills, but are not a panacea. The Coast Guard estimated a double hull on the Exxon Valdez might have cut the oil outflow from its grounding on Bligh Reef in 1989 from 11 million gallons to 4.4 million gallons, which would still have been a catastrophic spill.

Editorial reaction to the escorts legislation was swift and positive. "Prevention is gospel in protecting the Sound and Alaska's prosperity," the Anchorage Daily News wrote soon after Murkowski and Begich introduced their legislation. "Our senators have offered an 'amen' with the force of law. Their bill deserves swift passage to assure safe passage of Alaska's oil."



Loaded oil tankers traveling in Prince William Sound are each escorted by two high-performance tugs. Photo courtesy of Alyeska Pipeline.

Ice detection radar

The council is pleased to report that the U.S. Coast Guard has completed the installation of the ice detection radar monitor in its Vessel Traffic Center. The system was introduced in 2002 in an effort spearheaded by the council. Alyeska has been operating and maintaining the system, which helps to detect and track icebergs from Columbia Glacier as they drift into the tanker lanes in Prince William Sound. The system has been instrumental in assisting oil tankers navigating through the Sound during the months when ice flow is more prominent.

SAFETUG projects

In 2008, the Council joined the Maritime Research Institute Netherlands' SAFETUG joint industry projects, which included nearly 30 industry participants. The SAFETUG I portion of the project focused on the systematic modeling of tug performance in heavy weather. The institute has built a facility that utilizes scaled down tugboats for use in its research. We believe the data collected during the project will help in determining whether a more capable vessel is needed for duty at Hinchinbrook Entrance and in the Gulf of Alaska.

The project has now progressed to SAFETUG II, which will examine tug motion in relation to various weather and sea conditions, human performance of tug crews in various weather and sea conditions, and crew training. SAFETUG II is expected to be completed in spring 2010.

The next step will be for staff to conduct an analysis of the data gathered during SAFETUG I and relate it to the existing fleet of Prince William Sound tanker escort vessels.