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Prince William Sound iceberg radar project comes online

Oil tanker safety in Prince William Sound took a major step forward this week when an iceberg-detecting radar system on Reef Island began transmitting to Valdez.

There, the radar signals will be used by the Coast Guard's Vessel Traffic Center to gauge iceberg risks in the Sound for the benefit of oil tanker captains and other mariners.

The startup of the system results from years of collaboration among a group of Prince William Sound stakeholders spearheaded by the Prince William Sound Regional Citizens' Council. Participants also included government agencies, the oil industry and other organizations.

"This is how citizen involvement was intended to work," said John Devens, executive director of the council. "We brought the parties together and helped fashion the consensus that led to the good results we're seeing today."

Tom Colby, the Valdez-based port manager for Alaska Tanker Company, said the new system would reduce risks for the tankers his company operates for BP, a major producer and shipper of North Slope oil.

"This is a good example of the public good being achieved through collaboration, rather than confrontation, between stakeholders," Colby said.

The radar, located about 30 miles southwest of Valdez, sweeps the tanker lanes and the mouth of Columbia Bay. Icebergs from Columbia Glacier, at the head of the bay, frequently drift into the tanker lanes.

For now, the system will operate on a test or advisory basis. Information generated by the system will be available to the Coast Guard and to mariners in the Sound, but it will not initially be used to officially determine whether ice hazards are sufficient to close the lanes to tanker traffic.

After a test and validation period of up to five years, the stakeholders will declare the system fully operational, at which time the Coast Guard will begin using it in making go/no-go decisions on tanker departures from Valdez.

The system's Reef Island site overlooks Bligh Reef, scene of the 1989 Exxon Valdez oil spill, which, at 11 million gallons, is the worst in North American history. Ice from Columbia Glacier played a role in that spill, as the Valdez had diverted from the tanker lanes because of earlier reports of icebergs when it struck Bligh Reef.

Ice caused another major tanker accident in the Sound in 1994 when the BP-chartered Overseas Ohio struck an iceberg, causing damages of approximately \$1 million to the vessel. The Ohio was inbound with empty tanks at the time, and no oil spilled.

Radar signals travel from Reef Island via microwave to Alyeska's Ship Escort/Response Vessel System in Valdez, and from there to the Coast Guard's Vessel Traffic Service.

The Coast Guard will maintain the radar system on Reef Island, while Alyeska will maintain the tower on which the radar antenna is mounted, the power supply, and the microwave link to Valdez.

"This is a bright day for maritime safety in Prince William Sound," said Commander Mark Swanson, head of the Coast Guard station in Valdez. "This newly operational ice detection system represents the best internationally available ice detection technology in existence."

"We tip our hat to those in the citizens' council and the other participating entities who have made it happen," said Alyeska's Richard Ranger.

Participants in the radar project included the council, the Coast Guard, Alyeska, Alaska Tanker Co., the Alaska Department of Environmental Conservation, the Oil Spill Recovery Institute, Prince William Sound Community College, and the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration.

The citizens' council is an independent non-profit corporation that promotes environmentally safe operation of the Valdez Marine Terminal and associated tankers. Its work is guided by the Oil Pollution Act of 1990, and its contract with Alyeska. RCAC's 18 member organizations are communities in the region affected by the 1989 Exxon Valdez oil spill, as well as commercial fishing, aquaculture, Native, recreation, tourism and environmental groups.