

REVISED BRIEFING

Resolution Requesting a Voluntary Vessel Speed Reduction by Tankers 4-8

Briefing for PWSRCAC Board of Directors – May 2024

ACTION ITEM

Sponsor: Rick Steiner, Oasis Earth
Project number and name or topic: Resolution Requesting a Voluntary Speed Reduction by Tankers in Prince William Sound

1. **Description of agenda item:** The Board is being asked to adopt a resolution requesting all Trans Alaska Pipeline System (TAPS) tanker owners voluntarily adopt a vessel speed reduction to 10 knots or less in the Prince William Sound traffic separation scheme. The purpose of the vessel speed reduction is to reduce the environmental footprint of the TAPS fleet, including reducing risk of vessel whale-strikes, underwater noise, and carbon emission from the burning of fossil fuels.
2. **Why is this item important to PWSRCAC:** This resolution was drafted and requested by local citizen Rick Steiner of Oasis Earth in Anchorage, Alaska. Steiner has requested to address the Board at the May 2024 meeting about this topic. Steiner previously provided public comment to the Board on January 26, 2023, on the issue of TAPS tanker whale-strike mitigation in Prince William Sound. This item is important to PWSRCAC as it relates to the potential for environmental impacts in the Exxon Valdez oil spill area by terminal and tanker operations.
3. **Previous actions taken by the Board on this item:** None.
4. **Summary of policy, issues, support, or opposition:** In a letter dated November 14, 2023, NOAA responded to a request for rulemaking to adopt a whale-strike risk reduction protocol in Prince William Sound, to include vessel speed reduction by all large vessels, in particular oil tankers. In the letter, NOAA denied the request for rulemaking on the grounds of the number and location of humpback whales in PWS; existing federal regulations to avoid approaching humpback whales; and existing speed restrictions for laden tankers. NOAA reaffirmed its position in a letter issued February 20, 2024, in response to a complaint submitted following NOAA's original letter. NOAA correspondence is available upon request.

At the May 2023 PWSRCAC Board meeting, POVTS Chair Steve Lewis presented on an internal memorandum titled "TAPS Tanker Speed Reduction Operational Overview," dated April 5, 2023, that was prepared by the POVTS Committee. While the POVTS Committee is in unanimous agreement that vessel/whale interaction in PWS and GOA is an area of concern and that speed reduction can be a significant mitigating factor, the Committee also expressed reservations about the specific action requested by Mr. Steiner.

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5. **Committee Recommendation:** Both the POVTS and Scientific Advisory Committees have previously discussed the issue of a voluntary vessel speed reduction for tankers at the request of Mr. Steiner. At that time, the committees recommended deferring to NOAA to make a determination on the risk of tanker whale strikes in Prince William Sound. Following NOAA's determination issued in the letters described above, POVTS and SAC held a joint project team meeting on April 4, 2024, to again discuss the topic of tanker whale strikes in Prince William Sound and the draft resolution presented by Rick Steiner. The committees provided feedback on the proposed resolution, which was later revised by Mr. Steiner. POVTS then held a follow up meeting to discuss the revised resolution; a memo describing the outcome of that meeting is attached to this briefing sheet.

If the Board approves the proposed resolution, the POVTS Committee recommends adding "when it is operationally safe to do so" to the title of the draft resolution. This redline is depicted in Attachment A, version A1.

6. **Relationship to LRP and Budget:** None.

7. **Action Requested of the Board of Directors:** Adopt a resolution, drafted by Rick Steiner of Oasis Earth, requesting all Trans Alaska Pipeline System (TAPS) tanker owners to voluntarily adopt a vessel speed reduction in the Prince William Sound traffic separation scheme for the purpose of reducing the environmental footprint of the TAPS fleet.

8. **Alternatives:** The Board could choose to not adopt the resolution drafted by Rick Steiner of Oasis Earth.

9. **Attachments:**

- (1) Draft resolution authored and promoted by Rick Steiner, Oasis Earth.
- (2) Memo from the POVTS Committee, dated April 14, 2024, sharing their review and findings related to the draft resolution proposed by Rick Steiner.

Rick Steiner Version A1
DRAFT: Resolution 24-XX PWSRCAC

A1 -- simplified version, in response to POVTS and SAC concerns, presented for full Board consideration at May 2-3, 2024 meeting)

Requesting all Trans Alaska Pipeline System (TAPS) tanker owners to voluntarily adopt a Vessel Speed Reduction to 10 knots or less when it is operationally safe to do so* while transiting the PWS Traffic Separation Scheme (TSS), in order to reduce the overall environmental footprint of the TAPS fleet, including reducing risk of vessel whale-strikes, underwater noise, and fossil fuel use/carbon emissions.

WHEREAS, waters of Prince William Sound and the Gulf of Alaska (PWS/GOA) outside of Hinchinbrook Entrance are important habitat for many cetacean populations, including Humpback whales, Killer whales, Gray whales, Blue whales, Sperm whales, Fin whales, Sei whales, Minke whales, and several species of Beaked whales;

WHEREAS, all of these whales are known to occur periodically within the TSS transited by TAPS oil tankers and escort vessels;

WHEREAS, ship-strikes are a well-documented source of injury and death for cetaceans;

WHEREAS, there is overwhelming scientific consensus that a Vessel Speed Reduction to 10 knots or less substantially reduces the risk and impact of ship-strikes on whales, underwater noise generated by the vessels, and fossil fuel use/carbon emissions from the vessels;

NOW, THEREFOR BE IT RESOLVED, the PWSRCAC Board of Directors requests TAPS tanker owners to voluntarily adopt a Vessel Speed Reduction to 10 knots or less while transiting inbound and outbound in the TSS to/from its offshore limit outside Hinchinbrook Entrance, subject to safe navigation constraints, while abiding all other lower speed limits currently required in the TSS.

Rick Steiner Version A2
DRAFT: Resolution 24-XX PWSRCAC

A2 – longer, more detailed/complex version that POVTS and SAC Committees declined to support at their joint meeting April 4:

Requesting all Trans Alaska Pipeline System (TAPS) tanker owners to voluntarily adopt a Vessel Speed Reduction to 10 knots or less in daylight, 8 knots or less in dark, and post a bow-watch, while transiting the PWS Traffic Separation Scheme (TSS), in order to reduce the overall environmental footprint of the TAPS fleet, including reducing risk of vessel whale-strikes, underwater noise, and fossil fuel use/carbon emissions; and for the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) to expand its cetacean monitoring in the region.

WHEREAS, waters of Prince William Sound and the Gulf of Alaska (PWS/GOA) outside of Hinchinbrook Entrance are important habitat for many cetacean populations, including Humpback whales, Killer whales, Gray whales, Blue whales, Sperm whales, Fin whales, Sei whales, Minke whales, and several species of Beaked whales;

WHEREAS, several of these species are currently listed as Endangered under the federal Endangered Species Act (ESA), including Humpback whales, Blue whales, Sperm whales, Fin whales, and Sei whales;

WHEREAS, PWS/GOA is designated as ESA Critical Habitat for both the Mexico and Western North Pacific Distinct Population Segment (DPS) of Humpback whales;

WHEREAS, Humpback whale sightings in PWS have declined substantially, by as much as 90%, over the past decade;

WHEREAS, studies have documented Killer whale super-pod aggregations, with more than 150 individuals from several pods, seasonally in Hinchinbrook Entrance;

WHEREAS, the genetically distinct AT1 Killer whale pod, that was severely impacted by the 1989 Exxon Valdez Oil Spill losing 15 of its 22 members in the two years after the spill, and now with only 7 individuals and no reproductive females is at risk of becoming extinct, is listed as “Depleted” under the MMPA, and is known to frequent Hinchinbrook Entrance;

WHEREAS, Gray whales, that transit across the TSS outside Hinchinbrook Entrance, have recently suffered an “Unusual Mortality Event” in which their population declined from an estimated 20,500 individuals in 2019 to 14,526 in 2023, and are expected to decline further as their benthic prey resource in the Northern Bering Sea and Chukchi Sea continues to decline due to impacts of climate change/sea ice loss;

WHEREAS, studies have documented the presence of Fin whales, Blue whales, and Beaked whales in coastal waters of the GOA throughout the year, the presence of Humpback whales in fall and winter months, and Sperm whales across the continental slope;

WHEREAS, all of these whales are known to occur periodically within the TSS transited by TAPS oil tankers and escort vessels;

WHEREAS, ship-strikes are a well-documented source of injury and death for cetaceans;

WHEREAS, due to limited data and observational effort, it remains impossible to know how many whales have been struck by the more than 47,000 transits of TAPS tankers to/from the Valdez Marine Terminal since startup in 1977;

WHEREAS, due to data limitations regarding cetacean distribution in PWS/GOA, the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) is unable to provide a quantitative assessment of risk of ship-strikes on whales in the region, and thus has declined a request to adopt a rule requiring a Vessel Speed Reduction for large vessels transiting the region;

WHEREAS, there is overwhelming scientific consensus that a Vessel Speed Reduction to 10 knots or less substantially reduces the risk and impact of ship-strikes on whales, underwater noise generated by the vessels, and fossil fuel use/carbon emissions from the vessels;

WHEREAS, the voluntary Vessel Speed Reduction to 10 knots in southern California waters has reportedly resulted in a 50% reduction in vessel whale strikes/year, a 5 decibel/transit (~50%) reduction in underwater noise, and reduction of 650 tons of smog forming NO_x and over 22,000 tons of Greenhouse Gas (GHG) emissions/year;

WHEREAS, some TAPS tankers already comply with a voluntary Vessel Speed Reduction to reduce the risk of whale strikes in other waters they transit, such as off California;

WHEREAS, it is in the clear interest of the public, PWS tourism industry, oil industry, and government to adopt precautionary Vessel Speed Reduction for the TAPS fleet to reduce the risk of vessel strikes to individual whales in PWS/GOA waters, to reduce underwater noise in the marine environment, and reduce fossil fuel use/carbon emissions;

WHEREAS, the central mission of the PWSRCAC is to promote: *“environmentally safe operation of the Alyeska terminal and associated tankers;”*

NOW, THEREFOR BE IT RESOLVED, the PWSRCAC Board of Directors requests TAPS tanker owners to voluntarily adopt a Vessel Speed Reduction to 10 knots or less in daylight, 8 knots or less in dark, while transiting inbound and outbound in the TSS to/from its offshore limit outside Hinchinbrook Entrance, subject to safe navigation constraints, while abiding all other lower speed limits currently required in the TSS; to post a bow-watch while transiting the TSS to detect whales and alert the bridge

crew; to agree to a standard bridge response procedure to avoid striking whales detected in the TSS; and to explore additional measures to detect and avoid whales along their route;

BE IT FURTHER RESOLVED, the PWSRCAC Board of Directors requests NOAA to expand distribution surveys for all cetaceans in PWS/GOA in the vicinity of the TSS, and explore additional technologies to detect and/or deter cetaceans from oncoming ship strike hazards, including deployment of seafloor High-frequency Acoustic Recording Packages (HARPs) to monitor cetacean calls/presence along the TSS, and the potential use of acoustic sensors to provide real-time whale distribution information to ships in transit in the TSS.

April 14, 2024

FROM: POVTS Committee; S. K. Lewis, Chair

TO: PWSRCAC Board of Directors
Donna Schantz, PWSRCAC Executive Director

RE: A resolution to requests TAPS tanker owners to voluntarily adopt a Vessel Speed Reduction to 10 knots or less while transiting inbound and outbound in the Prince William Sound Traffic Separation Scheme (TSS) to/from its offshore limit outside Hinchinbrook Entrance, subject to safe navigation constraints, while abiding all other lower speed limits currently required in the TSS.

Actions: During March and April of 2024, the POVTS committee was again asked to review the operational implications to the TAPS fleet of a Vessel Speed Reduction (VSR) to 10 knots or less while transiting inbound and outbound in the Valdez TSS from its offshore limit to the Valdez Marine Terminal. In conjunction with this evaluation the committee also reviewed available information on the efficacy of VSR as a mitigation technique in ship-strikes on whales, underwater noise reduction and vessel stack emissions.

Findings:

1. No obvious adverse safety or operational impact to TAPS fleet maritime operation while limited to 10 knots within the TSS was identified.
2. Some vessel specific mechanical concerns when operating at 10 knots are possible but due to data unavailability issues these are beyond the capability of this review.
3. In areas having scientifically validated study results, VSR to 10 knots has been shown to reduce ship-strikes on whales, reduce ship generated underwater noise and reduce vessel stack emissions of atmospheric pollutants.
4. There is insufficient scientific data within Prince William Sound and the TSS to quantify the potential reductions to ship-strikes, ship generated underwater noise, or vessel stack emissions.

Conclusions:

The POVTS committee by consensus has reached the following conclusions:

1. POVTS finds no maritime operational considerations which would preclude requesting a voluntary VSR for the TAPS tankers within the TSS as detailed in the attached draft Resolution 24-XX.
2. POVTS finds that there is strong evidence that a beneficial, but presently unquantified, reduction in ship-strikes on whales, underwater noise, and stack emissions would result if the TAPS tankers were to observe a voluntary VSR within the TSS as detailed in the attached draft Resolution 24-XX.

Stephen K. Lewis
Chair, Port Operations and Vessel Transit Systems Committee