Firefighters from across Alaska converge on Valdez to learn about marine fire response

By Alan Sorum
Council Project Manager

A shipboard fire is dreaded by all mariners. When a fire occurs at a dock or a burning ship is brought into port, local fire departments are expected to respond. Since most communities in Alaska are located along a river or the coast, it is prudent to prepare for a vessel related incident. Techniques used in marine firefighting are quite different than those normally employed in structural fires on land. To better prepare land-based firefighters for such incidents, the council developed the Marine Firefighting Symposium which is held every two years. This past May, the council hosted the eighth edition of this symposium in Valdez.

Thirty-eight firefighters from 14 different Alaska communities, ten marine fire and salvage industry representatives, and fire officials from Alyeska, attended the three-day event. The first day provided classroom training geared towards a State of Alaska certification test. Two special presentations were made on liquefied natural gas issues in Alaska and public-private incident response partnerships. Crowley Maritime/Marine Response Alliance representatives presented a keynote address on the salvage of the cruise ship Costa Concordia. The speech highlighted just how complicated a salvage operation can get as industry comes into new maritime salvage and firefighting capability requirements.

Unalaska and Valdez firefighters at the Valdez harbor. Photo by Zac Schasleean.

Executive committee for next year includes a mix of council experience and new members

During its annual board meeting in Valdez this May, the council board held elections to choose its seven-member executive committee. Amanda Bauer of Valdez was elected to her third term as president. Thane Miller, who represents Prince William Sound Aquaculture Corporation on the board, was elected to his third consecutive term as vice-president. Bob Shavelson, who represents the Oil Spill Region Environmental Coalition, was re-elected as secretary. Newly seated Orson Smith of Seward was elected as treasurer.

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New staff member has deep ties to Alaska

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Volunteer Spotlight

Exxon Valdez taught many lessons to those who paid attention

Volunteer Pete Heddell, member of the council’s Port Operations and Vessel Traffic System committee, has seen a lot of changes in Prince William Sound and Alaska.

“Some people knew it instinctively, but they didn’t thought about it in relation to oil spills.”

Heddell says that the technology on board both tugs and tankers has changed dramatically in recent years. He reads a lot just to stay informed on vessel-related technology news. “The equipment that goes onto these vessels is the latest and greatest. What is interesting is that a company will build it, launch it, christen it, and then it’s old news because of the new technology that’s right behind it.”

“The council has long been pushing for a more sustainable and equitable funding mechanism for the division. The new law places a per-gallon tax on wholesale refined fuels, including gasoline and heating oil.

More information, see the May issue of The Observer: www.bit.ly/SPArHill
How can we combine efforts and verify response capabilities?

The safe transportation of oil requires that the industry plan extensively for spill prevention and response. Beyond planning, extensive practice of the tactics described in the plans help verify that these spill response plans will work as written.

Drills and exercises conducted today are many and varied. These drills test different federal and state requirements. Some are aimed at maintaining proficiency, others verify response capabilities and strategies, or marine firefighting or salvage plans.

With so many drills and exercises, surely there must be an opportunity to combine drills for the needs of both shippers and regulators for cost savings and efficiency, particularly in Alaska, where companies often share the same response contractors, equipment, and plans, without sacrificing preparedness.

Drills and exercises in Prince William Sound

The Oil Pollution Act of 1990 requires the companies shipping North Slope crude oil out of Valdez to have a common spill response plan. Separate drills are conducted for the Valdez Marine Terminal and associated tankers, even when the same response contractor is used, because they have different plans. Alyeska, who operates the Valdez Marine Terminal, and the Prince William Sound shippers share an oil spill response organization: the Ship Escort/Response Vessel System, or SERVS. SERVS is responsible for initiating a spill response in an emergency. Both the State of Alaska and the federal government require at least one table top exercise and one field deployment exercise at the Valdez Marine Terminal every year. Some years there are more. SERVS conducts tanker towing exercises and numerous other field deployments each year. The Prince William Sound shipping companies take turns conducting a major spill response exercise each year.

The shipping companies send observers to each other’s exercises. Even though these companies bring their own corporate incident management teams, they are working from the Prince William Sound tanker contingency plan with the same equipment and performance expectations. This is a pretty efficient way to do business.

In most states outside of Alaska, these oil shipping companies and terminals have their own independent plans and must run their own independent exercises.

Looking for overlapping responsibilities for further efficiencies

Separate oil spill contingency plans are maintained by the federal government, regional and state agencies, and local industries. Local plans must conform to regional and state area plans, which in turn must conform to the national contingency plans.

The higher level national and regional area plans are less specific but contain valuable guidance on key matters such as how to engage and incorporate the concerns and resources of local communities and stakeholders, common geographic response strategies, spill response resources, the process for selecting potential ports of refuge, and how to deal with cultural and historical sites. They also, at least in Alaska, speak to the public expectations of transparency with the dissemination of incident information and sharing of incident action plans.

Alyeska’s 2015 Atigun Award spotlights hearing protection, and communication

Alyeska’s Valdez Marine Terminal is a unique work environment where hundreds of professionals from dozens of trades perform thousands of various tasks daily. But there is one thing that remains the same every moment at the terminal’s Power Vapor facility. “There’s a constant noise of machinery here 24 hours a day,” said Scott Smith, Utilities Power Vapor Supervisor.

Employees at Power Vapor can work in environments as loud as a 747 jet engine (118 decibels). That level of noise demands safe hearing protection and effective communication tools. After almost 18 years of working in various positions at the terminal, Smith worried about his team’s hearing protection and communication.

When he landed a supervisory position, he worried about his team’s hearing protection and effective communication. “It’s been a real success,” Smith said. “The hearing protection is superior to anything we’ve ever had and our technicians don’t have to yell into microphones in front of their faces anymore. Everybody is telling me, ‘Holy cow. I’m hearing things I’ve never heard before in the plant!'”

Smith said that when he became supervisor, Power Vapor operators and technicians expressed to him that their hearing protection devices weren’t effective. Smith knew the feeling. He said the bulky, clunky equipment was heavy and uncomfortable on the user’s neck and shoulders. The equipment also made communication difficult with its faulty volume controls and microphones that allowed loud sounds to mask out a user’s voice.

That caused occasional communication issues between staff and the control room.

Smith examined data from Alyeska’s Safety program, which took noise readings from around the Terminal. He then reached out to Tom Brady of Alyeska’s Occupational Health Unit.

“Tom was key in helping out with this — he found CavCom, which offers intrinsically safe, good communications,” Smith said. “I recognized the issue, but the solution wouldn’t have happened without Tom.”

Smith is also quick to deflect special attention for the success of the new earpieces, but proud to know that his team is safer and their story might help others on TAPS work safely, as well.

“I was surprised with the Atigun Award; pleased but surprised,” Smith said. “I’m just doing my job and trying to make sure we don’t walk out of the building with no hearing. I prize my hearing. ... I hope this kind of recognition inspires people to make their workplace safer and find better ways to do things, whether they get recognized for it or not. We just don’t want people to get hurt.”

• Submitted by Alyeska Corporate Communications

Mark Swanson

See page 7, Swanson

From Alyeska

Alyeska’s 2015 Atigun Award spotlights hearing protection, and communication

From Alyeska Corporate Communications.

Power Vapor staff Scott Smith and Tim Medaris sport state-of-the-art hearing protection, and Dwayne Webster wears a more traditional model. Photo courtesy of Alyeska Corporate Communications.

The Observer
A look back at the early years of the Prince William Sound Regional Citizens’ Advisory Council

One of the most radical innovations to come out of the Exxon Valdez spill was the establishment of permanent, industry-funded citizen oversight to promote the environmentally safe operation of the oil industry. It’s been over a quarter of a century since the Prince William Sound Regional Citizens’ Advisory Council was formed. To mark that anniversary, The Observer is running a four-part series documenting the founding and early development of the council, and the hopes and intentions of some who were closely involved with the early days of the council.

These stories help us understand how citizens and the oil industry rallied together to create a citizens’ oversight group to protect Prince William Sound from future oil spills. The stories are in oral history format. Oral history is the practice of preserving personal testimonies about the human experience. Subjectivity is both the greatest strength and weakness of oral history; it can convey emotions linked to a specific time period, but the information may not be as accurate as other methods of documenting history. As stated by Mark Hutton in his interview, “sometimes memories are colored by the hope of what you thought you were trying to do and not necessarily exactly the way it happened. Twenty years ago was a long time ago, and this is my best recollection.”

Part three of four

The January talked about efforts to form a council before the spill and immediately after, and in May, we read about the emotional turbulence of the first few years of the council and how members learned to channel that emotion into a professional, effective organization. This issue, we are covering the positives and negatives of the way the council was organized. Finally, in September, we will hear lessons learned about the value of citizen oversight in our region.

All four parts, plus the full interviews, are now available on our website, please visit: www.bit.ly/PWSRCACstories.

“I think the positives far outweigh the negatives. The fact that citizens and grassroots organizations in their cities and other interest groups have a very solid, assured voice that guarantees that they will be listened to, and that they can participate in the decisions that affect the traffic in the TAPS system, is very positive.”

- Scott Sterling
Sterling represented the City of Cordova on the council’s board of directors from December 1990 to March 1993.

“It’s a give and take process, and that’s what it was set up to do. Some people say the RCAC has too much input into industry and some people say we shouldn’t be shipping oil because it’s too dangerous. On the other hand, reason dictates that the world moves by oil, and though we have all kinds of alternative energy, for the foreseeable future we are a world that uses oil.”

- Sen. Frank Murkowski
Murkowski was a U.S. Senator from Alaska in March 1989, helped craft the Oil Pollution Act of 1990, and proposed an amendment to require citizens’ oversight councils for Prince William Sound and Cook Inlet.

“I think the organization has done a real good job of protecting the economic interests of the people and the organizations they serve. I think, honestly, as far as what works, we protect the oil industry’s economic interests as well. Because of our counter force to the constant cost cutting, I think we have kept the pressure on to assure good systems are in place, or to actually improve them, and that’s good for industry’s bottom line. But their system, which is set up with bonuses based on cost cutting, doesn’t deal well with that. So we’re kind of like this counter process and counter pressure to actually get appropriate environmental protections and expenses built in and paid for, despite the cost cutting pressures that they have.”

- Joe Banta
Banta was one of the first staff members for the council. He has managed projects for the Oil Spill Prevention and Response and the Scientific Advisory Committees.

“It’s very important for people involved with RCAC and the shippers to go around the different communities to see the beauty of the area that we want to protect. I remember specifically one meeting in Seldovia, there was a new representative for Exxon at that meeting, and I think it had an impact on him, to see the level of commitment on a volunteer basis, folks coming together to provide input that otherwise they wouldn’t have a vehicle available to do that. I think it’s a very positive outcome, the benefit of having stakeholders involved in the process at the ground level rather than the decisions coming out from some regulatory body, and the only option is to file suit.”

- Bill Walker
Walker represented the City of Valdez on the council’s board of directors from July 1990 to September 2001.

Council members at a board meeting in December 1993. Pictured: Mike Gallagher, representative of Valdez; Dennis Lodge, representative of Seward; Jim LaBelle, representative of Chugach Alaska Corporation; Wayne Coleman, Representing the Kodiak Island Borough; Darrell Olson, representative of Tustek; and Bill Walker, representative of Valdez.
“The really important thing about the contract was, we had to be funded well enough to be able to hire experts, predominantly scientists, to do studies and make recommendations; we needed money to compete with the experts that the oil industry was coming up with. The contract allowed us to be independent. We couldn’t make them do anything, but they had to listen to our advice and they had to respond to our advice. They could comment and give feedback, but they didn’t have a say in the final decision on our advice. When the decisions on what the advice would be were made and votes were taken, the shippers and the oil industry did not have a vote.”

- Marilyn Leland
Leland represented the Cordova District Fishermen United on the council’s board of directors from July 1989 to September 1991.

“The paradigm shift was making citizens have an ability, by having the money, to have staying power. The money goes toward providing informed, technical comments to the agencies that were modifying or marginalizing the regulations and requirements. Before, without active citizen input, we ended up with a spill response plan that gathered dust, a spill barge that was frozen in the ice, less Coast Guard oversight and legislative oversight, and on and on and on. So combating complacency really is the driving force of what we’re about.”

- Joe Banta

“I think the funding is adequate to make sure its scientific and technical arms are competent. The review process and the addressing of the many engineering, technical, and maritime commerce issues that go into it are understood and reviewed by people with the aid of competent contractors and advisors. That enables a person from a fishing group or a municipality or one of the other constituent members to be effective. I think with proper leadership and good faith you can’t expect more from a democracy than people putting their energy into being effective and using their own voices.”

- Scott Sterling

“I think it’s a pretty revolutionary idea that has had positive impacts all over the world. Again, the only downside of trying to translate this to other parts of the world is the idea of granting this kind of group a level of autonomy that allows them to step out and criticize industry and really demand changes. But I know that in other places where they’ve tried to establish these kinds of organizations, where there isn’t a guaranteed source of funding or industry isn’t required to provide a minimum amount each year, it just doesn’t work.”

- Anne Rothe
Rothe represented the National Wildlife Federation on the council’s board of directors from July 1989 to December 1993.

“There are no guarantees that can absolutely insure against any kind of mishap or disaster, but the entire process of enhancing safety is greatly benefited by having the local people who know local conditions and who care about the locality where they live take part in the decision making process. By that I don’t mean that they share authority, but their input is solicited and appreciated.”

- Scott Sterling

“The one thing that joins everyone is their pride in our mission. Even though the board members may have different political beliefs, they have that one thing that ties them all together; they truly want to see industry work safely.”

- Linda Robinson
Robinson was one of the first staff members, hired as administrative assistant in 1990. She later served as financial manager and outreach coordinator.

“I think allowing citizens to have a say, to sit at the table, has been a tremendous benefit. You never know how things would have gone if there hadn’t been an RCAC, but you can look at other parts of the world such as the Gulf [of Mexico] Coast and see how disconnected the people who utilize the water there are from the industry. We don’t have that issue in Alaska anymore.”

- Tim Robertson
Robertson represented the City of Seldovia on the council’s board of directors from July 1989 to December 1991.

The council’s board of directors meet in Cordova in 2001.
Firefighters learn how to respond to fires onboard marine vessels

Thank you to the symposium sponsors:

The Marine Firefighting Symposium could not be held without the significant support of industry and community participants:

- The State of Alaska provided travel funds for many of the fire department personnel.
- Crowley Maritime/Marine Response Alliance provided substantial financial support for the symposium.
- The City of Valdez waived facility fees for use of the Civic Center.
- The Alaska Fire Chief’s Association donated textbooks.
- Polar Tankers provided operational support and sponsored travel for the Nikiski Fire Department.
- Stan Stephens Glacier and Wildlife Cruises and the Southwest Alaska Pilots Association allowed their vessels to be used as training platforms for the firefighters.
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Participants were tested at the end of the symposium by a representative of the State of Alaska’s Department of Public Safety to receive their state certification in marine firefighting.

Elected to serve as at-large members of the executive committee were Melissa Berns, who represents the Kodiak Village Mayors Association, and Robert Archibald of Homer, two newly seated members. Long-time board member Patience Andersen Faulkner, who represents the Cordova District Fishermen United, is the third at-large member. These officers will serve until the next elections in May 2016.

New board members seated in May include: Mako Haggerty of Homer, who replaced Blake Johnson as the Kenai Peninsula Borough representative; Alisha Sughrue of Seldovia, who replaced Steve Lewis; and Orson Smith of Seward, who replaced Jim Herbert.

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THE OBSERVER is published in January, May, July and September by the Prince William Sound Regional Citizens’ Advisory Council. Except where credited to others, articles are written by Amanda Johnson, the public communications project manager for the council.

Questions or comments about anything in The Observer? Another topic that you want to hear about? Let us know!

Contact us:

newsletter@pwsrcac.org
Study results: No threat to human health

The council has been monitoring mussels and sediments in the region for the last 21 years. Since then, traces of hydrocarbons from the terminal and tanker operations have always been detected in the samples taken in Port Valdez.

While the council’s research shows that the amount is small and has been declining in recent years, these detected levels of hydrocarbons in mussels raised concerns about its potential impact on human health.

The study determined that the shrimp’s exposure to hydrocarbons from the terminal does not pose a significant health risk. Very low levels of hydrocarbons were found in samples closest to the terminal. The study also compared the amount of oil found in various parts of the shrimp, as well as amounts found in different species of shrimp. The highest levels of hydrocarbons found were in the eggs of pink shrimp, where the average concentration was 630 parts per billion, well below contaminant levels considered unsafe to eat. No evidence of hydrocarbon contamination was found from the shrimp’s tail, which is the part usually consumed by humans.

Researchers, however, suggested further study to determine whether the hydrocarbon levels detected in the eggs have an effect on the shrimp’s development.

To read the full report, visit www.bit.ly/PWSShrimpstudy.

About the Council’s Advisory Committees

Much of the council’s work is done through permanent volunteer committees made up of board members, technical experts, and citizens with an interest in making oil transportation safer in Alaska. These standing committees work with staff on projects, study and deliberate current oil transportation issues, and formulate their own advice and recommendations to the council’s full board of directors.

Our committees provide an avenue for public participation in the council’s work. The council has five technical committees:

Terminal Operations & Environmental Monitoring:
The Terminal Operations and Environmental Monitoring Committee identifies actual and potential sources of episodic and chronic pollution at the Valdez Marine Terminal.

Members:
- Chair: Harold Blehm, Valdez
- Vice-chair: Mikhail Foltmar, Anchorage
- Amanda Bauer, Valdez*

Port Operations and Vessel Traffic Systems:
The Port Operations and Vessel Traffic Systems Committee monitors port and tanker operations in Prince William Sound. The committee identifies and recommends improvements in the vessel traffic navigation systems and monitors the vessel escort system.

Members:
- Chair: Amanda Bauer, Valdez*
- Vice-chair: Pat Duffy, Valdez*
- Clive Chambers, Seward
- Pete Heddell, Whittier

Scientific Advisory:
The Scientific Advisory Committee sponsors independent scientific research and provides scientific assistance and advice to other council committees on technical reports, scientific methodology, data interpretation, and position papers.

Members:
- Chair: John Kennish, Anchorage
- Vice-chair: Paula Martin, Soldotna
- Sarah Allan, Anchorage
- Wayne Donaldson, Kodiak*

Oil Spill Prevention and Response:
The Oil Spill Prevention and Response Committee works to minimize the risks and impacts associated with oil transportation by reviewing and recommending strong spill prevention and response measures, adequate contingency planning, and effective regulations.

Members:
- Chair: John LeClair, Anchorage
- Vice-chair: Jerry Brown, Kenai
- Robert Beedle, Cordova*
- Colin Daugherty, Anchorage

Information and Education:
The Information and Education Committee’s mission is to support the council’s mission by fostering public awareness, responsibility, and participation in the council’s activities through information and education.

Members:
- Chair: Cathy Hart, Anchorage
- Vice-chair: Linda Robinson, Homer
- Trent Dodson, Kodiak
- Jane Eisenmann, Kodiak
- Patience Andersen Faulkner, Cordova*

*Council director

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Please help us make our newsletter as helpful, informative, and useful as possible for YOU, our readers! Take a quick, 5-minute survey to let us know what information you are most interested in.

Please visit www.bit.ly/ObserverFeedback to fill out the survey. Thank you for your time.

You can also reach us at: newsletter@pwsrac.org
Community Corner

Sharing our mission with students

By Lisa Matlock  Outreach Coordinator

Universities, both from Alaska and out-of-state, offer field courses that can connect students to places and topics firsthand, adding a dose of reality to their academic learning and creating lifelong memories for participating students. Every year the council receives requests for presentations and educational activities to help students understand our mission, our work, and its global significance.

High school to college

For the past two years, the council has participated in one such course, an “Environmental Leadership Lab.” Rhode Island’s Brown University partners with the Cook Inlet Tribal Council and Kenai Peninsula College to provide exceptional high school students the opportunity to learn about the complicated interactions between natural and social systems in Alaska. Participants spend two weeks traveling throughout southcentral Alaska exploring how multiple stakeholders - corporate, governmental, native and non-native - struggle to balance consumption of natural resources with long-term sustainability.

Executive Director Mark Swanson and Programs Director Donna Schantz met with the students last summer when they were touring Valdez. Swanson described the connections students made to the council’s work as “astounding in their global focus. The students were very aware of models from all over the world that address risk management.”

College field courses

For years, New York’s Elmira College has held an environmental science field course in the Homer area, and has included the council in its syllabus. Before this year, the council’s presentations focused on the Exxon Valdez oil spill and changes that make oil transportation safer today. This spring, we added a mock oil spill activity to help the students understand oil spill response in the Alaskan environment.

Students from Vermont’s Middlebury College are planning to visit Kenai Peninsula College and Alaska Pacific University campuses this summer to study Arctic char in Alaska and the environmental issues and threats to that species. The council’s presentation will share specific Prince William Sound fisheries-related research and history with the students, along with a mock oil spill response.

Post-graduate opportunities

The council also works with graduate and post-graduate educational programs. This past spring council volunteer Jim Herbert met with Marshall Memorial Fellows in Seward. This fellowship program introduces a new generation of European leaders to different areas of the United States and helps them better understand transatlantic relations. Herbert talked to them about the Exxon Valdez oil spill and how efforts to prevent oil spills have changed since 1989. Swanson and I also met with two Seagrant legislative fellows from Washington, D.C. last year who were investigating Alaska marine systems with regard to science and law.

Prior to EoE

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Upcoming high school and college internships:

This summer, the council will be recruiting for next year’s interns. Several internship projects are being sought both at the high school and college level. The Scientific Advisory Committee hopes to replace intern Sarah Hoepfner’s aquatic invasive species monitoring and education project in Cordova.

Hoepfner has monitored the Cordova area for invasive green crabs and tunicates for the past two years, and has taught area students about invasive species. She recently graduated and is leaving for college this year.

The council is also seeking two college-age interns this summer. The first is an environmental education intern who will bring the council’s K-12 Oil Spill Curriculum lessons to regional community classrooms. The second is a engineering student for an oil properties comparison project. If you, or your student that you know, might be interested in one of these internships, please contact me at lisa.matlock@pwsrcac.org or (907) 273-6235.

PRINCE WILLIAM SOUND REGIONAL CITIZENS’ ADVISORY COUNCIL

The Prince William Sound Regional Citizens’ Advisory Council is an independent, non-profit corporation formed after the 1989 Exxon Valdez oil spill to minimize the environmental impacts of the trans-Alaska pipeline terminal and tanker fleet.

The council has 19 member organizations, including communities affected by the Exxon Valdez oil spill and groups representing Alaska Native, aquaculture, environmental, commercial fishing, recreation and tourism interests in the spill region.

The council is certified under the federal Oil Pollution Act of 1990 as the citizen advisory group for Prince William Sound, and operates under a contract with Alyeska Pipeline Service Co. The contract, which is in effect as long as oil flows through the pipeline, guarantees the council’s independence, provides annual funding, and ensures the council the same access to terminal facilities as state and federal regulatory agencies.

The council’s mission: Citizens promoting environmentally safe operation of the Alyeska terminal and associated tankers.

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Vice Pres.: Thane Miller - Prince William Sound Aquaculture Corp.
Secretary: Bob Shavelson - Oil Spill Region Environmental Coalition
Treasurer: Orson Smith - City of Seward

Anchorage

Ian Angiak - Community of Chenega Bay
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Robert Bredelle - City of Cordova
Melissa Berns - Kodiak Village Mayors Association
Al Burch - Kodiak Island Borough
Wayne Donaldson - City of Kodiak
Pat Duffy - Alaska State Chamber of Commerce
Patience Andersen Faulkner - Cordova District Fishermen United
Mako Haggerty - Kenai Peninsula Borough
John Johnson - Chugach Alaska Corporation
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Shawna Popovic, Project Manager Assistant
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Linda Swiss, Project Manager

Valdez

Sarah Hoepfner

COUNCIL BOARD MEETINGS

The citizens’ council board of directors meets three times annually. The January meeting is held in Anchorage, May in Valdez, and the September meeting is rotated among communities affected by the Exxon Valdez oil spill. Board meetings are open to the public, and an opportunity for public comments is provided at the beginning of each meeting. Agendas and other meeting materials are available on our website: www.pwsrcac.org.

The tentative board meeting schedule for the coming year is: September 17 and 18, 2015 in Kodiak; January 21 and 22, 2016 in Anchorage; and May 5 and 6, 2016 in Valdez.

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