

**SERVS' Fishing Vessel Program Meeting
Sponsored by Prince William Sound Regional Citizens'
Advisory Council**

December 8, 2005

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Overview

On December 8, 2005, the Prince William Sound Regional Citizens' Advisory Council (PWSRCAC) hosted a meeting with fishing vessel captains participating in the SERVS' fishing vessel (F/V) program. The objective of this meeting was to get direct feedback from some of the participants in the SERVS' fishing vessel program regarding how the program was working. The fishermen were asked to address areas that were working well and areas that could be improved within the SERVS program.

Fishermen were selected from most of the communities that are represented by the PWSRCAC Board of Directors which are communities impacted by the EXXON VALDEZ oil spill. Fishermen participating in the meeting were from Kodiak, Seldovia, Homer, Seward, Whittier, Cordova, and Valdez. Also in attendance were PWSRCAC Board Members, Oil Spill Prevention and Response Committee (OSPR) members, PWSRCAC staff members, and an Alaska Department of Environmental Conservation representative. By design, no fishing vessel administrators (FVAs) were invited to the meeting and SERVS was not asked to attend in order to allow the fishing vessel captains to speak freely and candidly.

This report closely follows the meeting agenda. Each topic discussed at the meeting is covered and the general responses from the fishermen are provided.

Review of Proposed Nearshore Tactics Changes

Joe Banta discussed the Nearshore Tactics Workgroup which includes representatives from SERVS, ADEC, the Response Planning Group (RPG), and PWSRCAC. The workgroup was established to look at nearshore oil spill response tactics and the changes in the fishing vessel fleet in the EXXON VALDEZ Oil Spill (EVOS) region.

The following describes the proposed changes to the nearshore tactics of the PWS Tanker Plan. The current status was reported as the RPG was working on an amendment to present to ADEC for public review. The proposed changes include the following:

- Incorporating the use of Current Busters into each of the first four Nearshore Taskforces. The Current Busters are viewed as the Best Available Technology (BAT) because of their capability to operate at a higher speeds and their capability to contain oil better than normal oil booms.
- The number and capacity of oil skimmers, boom, and mini-barges will remain the same.
- The number of fishing vessels per taskforce may drop from 38 to 28 vessels and may include two seine skiffs. The number of vessels associated with each taskforce is being reduced to facilitate a faster response. This proposed cutback is only for the nearshore taskforces.
- The tactics proposed include two Current Buster systems, 4 J/U booming systems, and sensitive area protection vessels and boom.

- Fishing vessels and boom will be dedicated to sensitive area protection for the first time in the plan.
- The nearshore tactics will be tested during upcoming exercises and drills.

The table was opened up for discussion at this point in the meeting. The following are the general comments made by the participating fishermen.

- It would be helpful for fishing vessels to know their roles in drills. It is important for fishing vessels to know when something is an actual test of their ability to do something so that it can be included in the contingency plan.
- Mini-barges need to be better equipped. The mini-barges need better lines and shock absorption. The mini-barges are not well taken care of. The barges could potentially ruin fishing vessels that are not steel or aluminum. Fishing vessels are incapable of handling mini-barges without proper protection. It was suggested that it might be better to use a bladder but that bladders may be hard to handle.
- There should be a group of boats that have worked together to be effective. Fishing vessels should be assigned to regular teams.
- Use more less-expensive equipment (rather than using less more-expensive equipment). It is recommended to use more boats doing specific tasks rather than using a more expensive boat to do several tasks. The point is that losing one vessel assigned to many tasks (such as towing boom, operating the skimmer, and handling barges) becomes more critical to the overall systems if it breaks.
- It is difficult to get everyone to match up right. There are many considerations that need to be made when matching vessels to tasks. These considerations include horsepower, vessel type, tow-point location, size of the wheel, propulsion type, and vessel handling capabilities.
- There should be standardized training for fishing vessel administrators (FVAs) for identifying vessel capabilities.

ADEC's Regulatory Overview

John Kotula of the Alaska Department of Environmental Conservation (ADEC) provided a presentation of regulatory requirements for the Prince William Sound plan holders and the role fishing vessels provide in the current contingency plans.

Mr. Kotula discussed SERVS' role as being a contractor for the plan holders. He explained Alaska's response planning standards (RPS). He discussed fishing vessels and open water response, nearshore response, and sensitive area protection. Regarding drills, Mr. Kotula said the advantage of announced drills (vs. unannounced) is that they allow people to look at their action/reaction to how well prepared they are in advance. He said unannounced drills give a

small piece of the pie showing possible weaknesses. ADEC may require industry to perform drills that address specific areas of concern.

ADEC performs a lot of equipment inspections and is paying particular attention to training. ADEC can identify a problem but cannot direct SERVS as to what to do about it because the direction goes to the plan holders. It is the plan holders' responsibility to direct SERVS.

SERVS is implementing a new database to track training records. Mr. Kotula further explained planning assumptions and availability of fishing vessels. He said the frequency and quality of training are being looked at, as well as training for a sufficient number of crew. Mr. Kotula also discussed how there were minimum numbers of trained fishing vessels and crews required to implement the contingency plan. Simulated callout drills check these minimum vessel and crew numbers.

The fishermen agreed that this presentation provided valuable information to them.

Topic 1 – Current and Future Status of Fishing Vessel Fleet

The fishermen were asked to provide their views on the following:

- Discuss the number of available vessels in your communities, if numbers are increasing or decreasing.
- What is the make-up of the fleet in your communities?
- SERVS recruiting process - Are there new vessels looking to join the program? Is SERVS actively trying to recruit new vessels? Is the approach SERVS uses effective?

The fishermen provided the following opinions for their communities:

Whittier: The number of vessels in Whittier may be decreasing. A couple of specialty vessels have been added but not working vessels. The core fleet is assigned for hatchery protection. There are not many true seiners in the Whittier fleet and maybe three on the core fleet. Inspections by USCG have become a bit of a problem for some vessels participating in the program.

Kodiak: The number of vessels has decreased in Kodiak. There are 350 seiners in Kodiak, most of which are deck aft. The change in the fleet has been that more gill-netters are operating as jiggers. With jigging, there are more active boats. There has not been any public outreach in Kodiak. There are not many bowpickers in Kodiak. The availability of seine skiffs has decreased significantly because of fees the harbormaster is charging. They used to be able to keep skiffs in the water as long as they were tied to a seiner but they are now being charged for them.

Cordova: The majority of the fleet in Cordova is bowpickers and many boats are seasonal. Many seiners and gill-netters are gone for the winter. When the core fleet started there were

about 268 seiners; now there are about 103 which shows a huge decline. 85 to 90 seiners are still actively fishing. Some Cordova fishermen have both a seiner and bowpicker but are not allowed to have more than one vessel in the F/V program.

Seward: Available vessels might be declining along with the willingness of people to sign onto the program. Charter boats may want to get involved with the program. There are less salmon boats and long-liners. One tactical issue is fishermen trying to tow off the stern. Another issue is what equipment can be left on deck.

Homer: Fishermen have to pay per foot moorage for every vessel, including skiffs. The fleet is decreasing in Homer. Most boats are combination long-liner, and there are some strictly long-liner vessels. There could be more encouragement from SERVS to sign onto the program by some type of recruiting. Last year in front of 30 people, the fishing vessel coordinator told fishermen the way they were hired is the way they could expect to work. In other words, they did not have to remove equipment that was on deck. Towing boom or equipment off of stern cleats should be discouraged. This issue needs clarification. Other HAZWOPER training opportunities are needed.

Seldovia: There are now six boats where they used to have 10. Vessels in Seldovia are declining but bigger boats are available. There is a 78-foot vessel trying to get a SERVS contract and the captain has been told there is no room in the program.

Valdez: There are about 12-15 seiners in Valdez, several of which are owned by people outside Valdez, and there are about 8-12 in the core fleet. There are several boats in the “soft core fleet” that are owned by people who live in Anchorage. Confidence is high that response would be excellent; many people have been involved with the program for years. Availability of crew could be a problem. Training has become a setback with the new on-water training program. The requirements for HAZWOPER training need to be clarified. Crews need updated HAZWOPER training.

ADEC has concerns about a shortage of people to carry out some scenarios. It is difficult to have only two windows of opportunity for HAZWOPER training. It is recommended to train as many as possible. Hazmat classes conducted by CISPRI have been very helpful in Homer and have been offered a few times a year. HAZWOPER refresher training is available online. The issues of marine oil spill responder and HAZWOPER refresher needs to be addressed, as well as expiration dates of certifications.

A program to help fishing vessel owners train crews on health and safety aspects of a response would be helpful. More emphasis should be placed on health and safety rather than training a lead man on how to start a power pack.

Topic 2 - SERVS Current Fishing Vessel Program – Administrative

Fishermen were asked to provide their views on the following topics without getting into specific contract dollars:

- Discuss current management of F/V Program – SERVS Fishing Vessel Coordinator and Local Fishing Vessel Administrators.
- Discuss F/V contracts and compensation for vessels and crews during training, exercises, responses, and maintenance for Tier I vessels.
- Discuss current operational costs associated with maintaining vessels for year-round participation in the program.

All participants discussed the following general responses.

F/V Program Management

The fishermen generally felt the FVA system works better than trying to work directly with SERVS. However, participants also expressed a need for more communication about the program from SERVS. A periodic newsletter or e-mail was suggested to allow fishermen to stay abreast of the program. It was suggested a newsletter could include information on training, recent exercises, updates on SERVS activities, and other F/V Program news.

There was total agreement that the FVAs are doing a very good job. Attendees believed that SEVRS gets a lot from the FVAs. Many also thought that issues the fishermen have brought to the FVA were blocked or not responded to by SERVS management and it was not known why this happens. The FVAs work as an insulating factor between SERVS and the fishermen, and it was recognized that the FVA's job was to manage the paperwork, not contract negotiations.

F/V Contracts and Compensation

The participants have had numerous vessel owners indicate to them that they were considering leaving the F/V Program because of compensation. The cost of doing business in these communities has risen, but compensation has not. Moorage and insurance keep going up. The Tier I winter compensation for crew is a huge dilemma. Captains have to pay out-of-pocket to maintain crew. There is concern about Cordova Tier I vessels being on one-hour callout. Crews are not paid well enough to provide this type of coverage. Additional qualified crews are not available and more crews need to be recruited. Boats are losing crews because of pay.

Fishermen are trying to work compensation issues with SERVS to cover increasing costs. SERVS has assured fishermen they are looking at the compensation issue but have to be able to justify an increase to the shippers. SERVS is also trying to change the situation for the core fleet. The contracts need to be updated.

Most fishermen remember the EXXON VALDEZ spill and are involved with the SERVS fishing vessel program due to commitment and sense of duty, not just compensation. Otherwise, there would be a lot less vessels participating. Many of the participants stated that they would rather have more training and exercises to increase their compensation than just a rate increase. However, the number of exercises has decreased over the years. Many Tier II vessels have not been to a drill in years other than the annual training.

Operational Costs

Everyone felt compensation was not keeping up with costs. Many cited increased moorage, insurance rates, and general maintenance costs. SERVS' compensation does not cover the cost and time to take fishing gear off for one day of training. Boat operation is expensive and one day of training cannot compete with fishing.

A lot of people do not want to incur the extra cost of the voluntary USCG program. The USCG decal is a headache for a lot of people. Costs are incurred to keep the decal current. As an example, rafts need to get updated to keep the USCG decal.

Topic 3 - SERVS Current Fishing Vessel Program – Training and Exercises

Fishermen were asked to provide their views on the following topics:

- Discuss SERVS' current training program – format, quality of training, and frequency of training for Tier I, II, and III vessels.
- Discuss response drills and exercises – number of exercises per year, assigned roles, and participation in tabletop exercises.
- Discuss training and assignment of F/V captains as strike team and taskforce leaders.

All participants discussed the following general responses.

Current Training Program

Fishermen would like SERVS to recognize levels of training and experience of vessel crews who have gone through years of various trainings. Fishermen do not feel they are valued for their knowledge. SERVS needs to test fishermen's knowledge of response operations. Training needs to be tracked along with task assignments. SERVS should request more input from fishermen during exercises.

Training with equipment in the warehouse and with equipment in the water has been very helpful. It has given vessel owners and crew a better idea of what is going on around them. Crews like the hands-on training. SERVS has allowed unlimited crewmember training, which has pleased fishing vessel participants. The attendees advise SERVS to continue this crew training. Additional recruiting for vessels and crews is also recommended.

Training with SERVS and CISPRI together is a good approach. Participants would like to see more training opportunities for Tier II vessels. Most Tier II vessels only participate in the annual training.

It would be helpful to have training in the fall, especially in Cook Inlet where ice can prevent vessels from getting to spring training. When training does occur in spring, it should be a little later for Kachemak Bay and Cook Inlet.

New vessels need much more training to raise their competencies. The quality of training should be addressed. There should be quality training rather than simply getting the equipment out.

There has been a sense of decreasing professionalism with the SERVS trainers. SERVS needs to ensure trainers are effective and stay focused. If a trainer has no respect from participants, the trainer is not effective.

Another positive part of training is when new topics are covered such as fire safety and medic training. Fishermen are more concerned with health and safety of crew when dealing with oil. They would like to see more emphasis on health and safety training. The fishing vessel inspections are good and should be continued. Training DVD/VHS videos would be useful to give to the boats so they could refresh during down times.

The wildlife program has changed and dropped some boats out of that program. New wildlife training needs to be offered.

Response Drills and Exercises

Better communication with fishing vessels during drills is needed. Fishermen want to know why they're where they are and what is expected. SERVS needs to clarify what equipment is acceptable on deck of the fishing vessels. Drills need to be more realistic as far as weather and wind are concerned. More training using oranges or other targets is encouraged.

There needs to be continuity of training. Different people are trained for different specialties. Vessel crews should receive cross-training in all operations regardless of the vessel type. SERVS needs to vary training assignments.

The meeting participants would like to see standardized boom training. They recommended that everyone handle boom and bring it up to the barge. Coordination between barge crews and fishing vessels could be better. It would be beneficial for F/V crews to observe Barge 500-2 operations.

Fishing vessels have to wait too long to get equipment. During on-water days, fishing vessels use equipment for an hour or two and then have to turn it back into the barge. Offloading equipment needs to be more efficient or done prior to fishing vessels arriving when possible.

Fishermen see being involved in table top/carpet top drills as being beneficial. It is recommended to conduct more tabletop exercises with qualified captains. There should be more drills and exercises as more confidence is gained through drills.

Fishermen would like to see ADEC evaluations of training and exercises to see how they were viewed. Unannounced drills are needed to actually check the number of available vessels.

Strike Team and Taskforce Leaders Training and Assignments

SERVS needs to provide a lot more training for Strike Team and Taskforce Leaders. Fishermen need a better understanding of the responsibilities of these roles. Expectations and responsibilities need to be defined better. Legal liabilities need to be covered.

Topic 4 – SERVS Current Fishing Vessel Program – Operations

Fishermen were asked to provide their views on the following topics:

- Discuss mobilization issues for response or exercises – time requirements, access limitations, and other factors.
- Discuss increased use of seine skiffs (Jitneys) during exercises and responses – winter usage, hour limits, and other considerations.
- Discuss F/V crew assignments to other tasks – deck hands for other vessels, beach operations, snow removal, and other assignments. Identify concerns/issues associated with these assignments. Discuss insurance for crews.
- Discuss work hours for spill responses – Would you stop at night during the summer? Discuss crewing for 24-hour operation.

All participants discussed the following general responses.

Mobilization Issues

Many of the ports get a lot of snow and there could be a delayed response because of it. Homer can experience times as long as 30 days within a three month span where ice and tides will not allow vessels to get in the water during the winter. The issue of mobilization in Homer needs to be addressed. There are about 10 days each month where there is a less than the minimum 16-foot tide for boat launching from the area's major boat yard. Various photos were shown that illustrate the unavailability of boats in the Homer harbor in December. Ice is an issue at times in the Homer harbor and boat launching areas.

There is concern about Cordova Tier I vessels being on one-hour callout. Crews are not paid well enough to provide this type of coverage. Crews will be hard to maintain.

Seine skiffs could be a problem to mobilize during the winter as most are not left in the water. One of the limitations of mobilization is work hours. Seasonally, this becomes more complicated in winter.

Seine Skiffs (Jitneys)

Use of the term jitney is a misnomer and should be replaced with the term "seine skiff."

Skiffs should not replace other vessels. However, the use of skiffs is extremely important. Skiffs are useful in monitoring boom, fixing things, getting logs out before being caught, etc. Anything done to limit use of skiffs is not recommended. There is a need for a flexible response. Fishing vessel operators do not want to get "boxed" into a response; they need to be effective in a creative way.

Two people are required in a skiff. It seems like additional crews would be needed if seine skiffs were used. If this increases crew requirements for mother vessels, it could be a problem. Crewing for skiffs can be a problem.

It was said that SERVS wants to add more seine skiffs for nearshore response. More training is needed for use of skiffs. Regarding communications, radios in skiffs are needed.

Fishing Vessel Crew Assignments to Other Tasks

Regarding crew assignments and other tasks, it should be up to the skipper. The captains have a problem with crew being taken off a boat to do some other task. Captains do not want to lose their own crew. If fishing vessels are being used, they need their own crew. Crews have been assigned to tasks SERVS should be doing. SERVS is cutting staff and manpower and using fishing vessel crews to make up for it. Some captains are dead set against this; they do not want their crew to leave their direct supervision. Captains are responsible for crews as their employers.

Work Hour During a Spill Response

The meeting participants do not expect to work around the clock. There are no 24-hour trainings. The SERVS system does not cover 24-hour operation in the event of a real spill. Adding enough crew to operate for 24 hours would reduce the number of available vessels because crews would be doubled up. Also there is not enough room for that many onboard. Safety of crew is the most important issue when looking at working hours.

Topic 5 – Future of SERVS Fishing Vessel Program

Fishermen were asked to provide their views on the following topics:

- Where would you like to see this program go?
- What are the key issues that need to be addressed by SERVS?
- How would you like to see PWSRCAC involved in strengthening the SERVS F/V Program?

All participants discussed the following general responses.

Program Future

Morale seems to be at a historical low. This may be due to lack of compensation, lack of respect, or not being included in decision making. The fishing program has support from participants. If the program continues as it is, attrition will take over. Vessels are being lost due to money. There have been increases in insurance, moorage fees, and other expenses. Crew pay is a problem. Some boat owners have to pay crews more out of their own pocket. Compensation and contract issues need to be worked out.

Everyone supports the fishing vessel program and wants to make it work because most remember the EXXON VALDEZ spill. Meetings between SERVS and fishermen have been positive and it is recommended these continue.

Communication between SERVS, FVAs, and fishermen needs to be improved. Fishermen would value more information and communication about what is going on with the program. Participants would like a newsletter or e-mails to keep up with program.

Seiners are being replaced by bowpickers in the fishing vessel fleet. Flexibility is needed in the system but more vessels are available. There are a lot of available vessels in Kodiak but they are not being recruited for this program. Maybe advertising is needed for this program.

Key Issues

Many issues were discussed throughout the day. The following issues seemed to keep coming up for discussion.

Future of SERVS' Fishing Vessel Program - The participants do not want to see the program go away but are concerned about the attrition of the fishing vessel fleet. They would like to see growth in the program. Trying to recruit new vessels into the program and continue to train additional crews would help strengthen the program.

Communication Between SERVS and the Fishermen - The participants would like better communication with SERVS. They felt Fishing Vessel Administrators were doing an excellent job, but fishermen would like more direct communication with SERVS about the program. A periodic newsletter updating everyone on training opportunities, exercises and other program activities would be helpful.

Compensation for the Fishing Vessels – Fishermen want to work out a better compensation arrangement with SERVS. They cited increased operational costs such as moorage, insurance and maintenance costs. The cost of keeping good, trained crews has also increased for the fishing vessel owners. The cost of living has increased over the last ten years and the SERVS contracts have not changed. The unanimous feeling among the participants was that SERVS needs to better support the program.

Fishing Vessel Training – The group would like to see more training opportunities. It was noted that the number of exercises has decreased over the years. Most Tier II vessels are only participating in the annual training. It was suggested that in addition to the annual spring training, a fall training be conducted to allow vessels and crews that could not participate in the spring training an opportunity to train and to provide additional training to those who wish to participate.

SERVS is encouraged to vary training topics. Participants would like to have training on Geographic Response Strategies, Wildlife Rescue, and better field observer training. During training the participants would like more direction about what is expected and why they are doing what they are doing. Fishermen would also like additional opportunities for their crews to be HAZWOPER trained at other times of the year. A DVD/VHS should be developed to provide refresher training to the fishing vessel crews when they have extra time to watch them.

Training Certification and Database – Fishing vessel program participants should be respected for their knowledge and skills. Participants would like to see crews become certified for the

training they have completed. Captains would like to see SERVS develop a database that would help with the continuity of the training each crew receives. Training and experience should be tracked to optimize these skills during a response.

Fishing Vessel Mobilization – Mobilization limitations including out-of-area owners/crews, snow, ice, and tides need to be identified and addressed. The use of seine skiffs during the winter also will cause problems because of mobilization and crewing issues. Use of skiffs should be a field level decision and not be dictated by the Command Post. There is also much concern with requirement of a one-hour callout for some vessels in Cordova.

Fishing Vessel Program Requirements – SERVS needs to clarify the requirements for vessels to participate in the program and then consistently enforce them. Everyone should be allowed to either have deck houses or reels on or everyone should be required to have clean decks. SERVS needs to be consistent in their rules. Fishing vessel inspections are seen as a positive approach to ensuring rules are being followed.

PWSRCAC's Involvement

Participants felt the meeting was extremely beneficial to them. They recommended that PWSRCAC have this meeting annually. Participation by ADEC was very valuable.

PWSRCAC's involvement was praised, as was participation by ADEC. It was felt PWSRCAC is an ally in promoting this fishing vessel program. PWSRCAC may have more ability to influence changes than individual fishermen. FVAs listen to fishermen concerns, but PWSRCAC is probably the best source for getting concerns addressed.

Fishing vessel program participants would like to get some feedback from ADEC on their drill evaluations.