

Tanker inspections need improvement, says DEC

Shippers of North Slope crude oil must improve the escorts for large tankers going through Valdez Narrow in the winter months, as a condition for gaining approval of their tanker oil spill contingency plans. Shippers cannot operate in state waters without approved plans.

Under a proposed decision by the Alaska Department of Environmental Conservation (ADEC), the shippers must submit proposals for improvements to be in place by October 1. However, that date may slip because of appeals on other aspects of the tanker contingency plans.

The needed improvements could be made by changing escort operations and procedures, or by using different escort vessels. The purpose of the improvements is to

enhance the ability of escort vessels to rescue a disabled tanker and thereby prevent an oil spill.

"The presence, capability and dependability of tanker escorts are of the utmost importance in preventing oil spills in Prince William Sound," the ADEC said in its findings. The Department also found that current knowledge about existing escort capabilities "suggests a very large crude carrier could not be saved in the Valdez Narrows" in high winds and seas.

A two year study completed in 1994 revealed new information about the limitations of escorts that had been in place. Through computer simulations, the Disabled Tanker Towing Study (DTTS) demonstrated changes that would improve the ability of

escorts to rescue a disabled tanker in different areas of the transit, including the Valdez Narrows.

In 1994, the shippers made operational changes in the tanker escorts, based on the findings of the DTTS and in anticipation of imminent changes in the federal escort requirements. Through the Valdez Narrows, the shippers slowed tankers from 6 knots to 5 knots and attached a tug, one of the escort vessels, to the stern. While that solution satisfied the new federal requirements, the ADEC has concluded that it does not satisfy the state requirement

for best available technology.

"The Department concludes that escort performance improvements are available, can be obtained and readily applied to assist very large crude carriers transiting the Valdez Narrows," the decision said.

The escort improvements are an interim measure, pending a study now in progress that is expected to shed more light on, among other things, the risks associated with tanker escorts and corresponding mitigation strategies. That study, the Prince William Sound Risk Assessment

Project, is a joint effort of shippers, Alyeska, RCAC, ADEC and the U.S. Coast Guard. It is expected to be completed in the spring. ADEC is also requiring that the shippers propose escort improvements based on the final report of the Risk Assessment.

The interim escort improvements are to be in place from October 1 through March 30, 1996, and apply only to tankers of more than 190,000 DWT.

Courtesy of The Observer, a publication of the Prince William Sound Regional Citizens Advisory Council (RCAC)