



News Release

On May 1st, the Aleutian Islands Waterways Safety Committee (AIWSC) convened to endorse the initial efforts of two workgroups established in February – the Waterways Safety Plan Workgroup and the Navigation Workgroup. Collectively, these workgroups will focus on enhancing maritime safety and response capabilities for vessels operating around the Aleutian Archipelago, Pribilof Islands, and the Alaska Peninsula. The Committee unanimously approved the Mission Statements of the Workgroups and prioritized their activities.

“I’m very excited about the level of engagement so far,” said Chair Peggy McLaughlin, “I think it reflects the overall willingness of the maritime community to improve safe operations in and around the Aleutian and Pribilof Islands and the Alaska Peninsula.”

Founded earlier this year, the AIWSC is part of a broad network of Harbor Safety Committees across the nation. But while most such organizations deal with the risks of a single harbor, the AIWSC is tasked with covering an area of nearly 650,000 square miles, stretching from the Alaska Peninsula to the edge of the U.S. Exclusive Economic Zone.

The region within the scope of the AIWSC is remote, storm-wracked, ecologically sensitive, and surprisingly busy. Thousands of ships transit the islands via the Great Circle Route each year, carrying cargo between Asia and North America, while hundreds of smaller vessels fish the islands’ rich waters. A ship in distress may find itself facing a severe sea state, several hundred miles from the nearest port of refuge.

Even close to Dutch Harbor, rescue is difficult. In 2004, the *M/V Selendang Ayu* broke against the northern shore of Unalaska Island, killing six people, spilling 300,000 gallons of heavy fuel and thousands of tons of soybeans. The disaster prompted a several-year risk assessment process, which ended in 2015. Even with the changes to transit distance offshore and the addition of areas to be avoided along the Chain as a result of the years long risk assessment, the members of the Aleutian Islands Risk Assessment felt that additional marine waterways improvement was necessary and possible, and the remaining money from the *M/V Selendang Ayu* settlement was approved to provide the seed funding for the AIWSC.

The *M/V Selendang Ayu* has not been the only disaster. In 2016 and 2017 alone, four vessels sank or grounded in the Aleutians, taking with them six million dollars, ninety thousand gallons of fuel, and two lives.

The AIWSC has brought together marine industries, fishermen and processors, communities and ports, marine pilots, local and international shipping companies, Alaska Natives, State and Federal agencies and non-governmental organizations to improve maritime safety across the region.

Committee members refined a list of maritime safety issues in the region, associated action items, and discussed the framework for a forthcoming waterways safety plan.

The next AIWSC meeting will be held in September. Several stakeholder seats are still open and public participation in meetings is encouraged. For more information, contact sara@nukaresearch.com or visit the AIWSC Website at <https://www.aleutianislandswsc.org/>.