PENINSULA CLARION

Team finds options to reduce marine oil spills

Posted: March 10, 2013 - 8:57pm | Updated: March 10, 2013 - 9:02pm

By Brian Smith

Peninsula Clarion

The Cook Inlet Risk Assessment Advisory Team recently identified eight oil spill risk reduction options they feel could be immediately implemented to reduce the chances of accidental oil spills, or to reduce the impact of spills in area waters.

The U.S. Coast Guard, Cook Inlet Regional Citizens Advisory Council and the Alaska Department of Environmental Conservation created the Cook Inlet Risk Assessment to look into spill risk reduction measures, like policies, rules, equipment, systems and services.

Following a Feb. 22 meeting in Anchorage, the group distilled a list of 25 spill risk reduction options and pegged eight for immediate implementation, another eight for further consideration and nine for exclusion. The options were gathered from studies, previous reports and public comments, according to a CIRCAC press release.

Tim Robertson, general manager of Nuka Research and project manager for the Cook Inlet Risk Assessment, said the options are still in their infancy as they will be shaped, ranked and further defined in the future.

“Based on their input from that meeting we will be further delineating what their recommendation actually is ... the details of the conversation and any research that would be required to flesh that out completely has yet to be done,” Robertson said. “What you’ll be seeing in the future is a very detailed description and recommendation for each one of these, what are now, bullet points.”

The eight options the group recommended to use immediately included:

▪ Establish a harbor safety committee to promote implementation of risk reduction options and support ongoing maritime safety improvement.

Robertson said such committees are used in various ports around the nation and include a panel of “marine stakeholders” who talk about the programs and practices in an area on a regular basis. Such a committee has never been established in Cook Inlet, he said.

“It is an important, over-arching recommendation because all of the other recommendations at some level probably play into the harbor safety committee,” he said. “They are an ongoing mechanism to promote safety and to review the operations in that port and how they may be improved.”

Although the group hasn’t yet prioritized them, Robertson said his sense is the committee is the highest priority idea that could be created immediately.

“They may actually establish this before we finish the project,” he said. “... If it makes sense and it is easy to do, do it.”

▪ Continue improving crew training, bridge team management, and communications.

Robertson said this recommendation has to do with “human factors” that contribute to spills.

“One of the major causes of marine accidents, accidents really anywhere, is the human factor, some kind of human error,” he said. “If you can improve human performance, you can reduce the frequency and severity of accidents. That’s been proven many times.”

The group recognizes many training programs exist — it would like to learn from those and encourage the community to participate in them, he said.

“What we’ll be doing is going in and researching that and find out what each of the companies is doing and then see if we can encourage the establishment of standards, or best practices for crews operating in Cook Inlet,” he said.

▪ Improve the Subarea Oil and Hazardous Substance Contingency Plan.

In Alaska, the state and federal regulations for what happens during an oil spill response have been combined into a unified plan, of which Cook Inlet is a subarea, Robertson said. Some of the other subarea regulations have been actively reviewed and redeveloped, but others, like Cook Inlet, have been “stale” and lack a committee to review and improve them, Robertson said.

“The recommendation ... is that subarea committee be re-established and that the plan be reinvigorated based on the knowledge that we’ve gained in the last 15 or 20 years,” he said.

That reinvigoration will likely place more emphasis on prevention efforts, not response measures, he said.

"We all know the best way to deal with an oil spill is to not have one," he said.

▪ Ask the federal government to implement regulations requiring non-tank vessel spill response plans.

Robertson said the Coast Guard spent about a decade developing rules for non-tank vessels — container ships, bulk carriers, offshore supply vessels and work boats among others — for adoption by the U.S. Department of Homeland Security. However, those rules have been "sitting on someone's desk ever since," he said.

"(Non-tank vessels) present a significant risk," he said. "Some of the container ships that come and go into Cook Inlet have more than 2 million gallons of persistent oil on board.

"If there was a spill with that class of vessel it has the potential for some fairly serious consequences."

Robertson said the CIRA team would likely need to lobby Alaska's congressional delegation to implement the rules.

▪ Maintain project depth in Cook Inlet, especially at Knik Arm shoal through dredging.

Robertson said the Knik Arm shoal that continuously fills in despite prolonged dredging efforts could disrupt commerce and become a hazard for a potential ship grounding near the port of Anchorage.

Dredging of the shallow land feature west of Fire Island allows ships to pass, but requires timing with the area's tides. Currently, however, the shoal is not being dredged, operators fear they are losing ground and there may come a day when ships can't get across it, he said.

"Because it is continually filling in, that tide (needed to navigate it) is getting higher and higher and higher," he said. "The pilots and (operators) are getting concerned that in a few years we may reach the point where we can't get across there every day, that you might have to wait until it is the highest tide of the month."

▪ Improve cell phone coverage where there is none in Cook Inlet.

Robertson said cell phone and mobile internet would increase safety and mariners' access to information such as port weather and ice concentrations.

"Some of these other projects that we are looking at evaluating down the road, components of them would be to provide more information to the mariners over the internet and this is the key for them to access it over the internet," he said.

▪ Seek continuous improvements in spill response equipment appropriate for Cook Inlet conditions.

▪ Continue to improve winter ice rules and guidelines.

Among the risk reduction options that would merit further evaluation are increasing rescue towing capability, improving ice monitoring capabilities and enhancing current navigational charts, gauges and Coast Pilot books.

Also suggested are mapping the sub-sea active and abandoned infrastructure of Cook Inlet, encouraging harbors to notify the Coast Guard if a vessel is not seaworthy, encouraging alternate inspections or audits of work boats, and encouraging the proposed construction of a trans-Foreland oil pipeline from the Drift River terminal to Nikiski.

The last option needing further evaluation is to "enhance vessel monitoring, situational awareness, and communications through applying Automatic Identification System technology, two-way communications via AIS, and sharing weather observation from ships and other sources."

Brian Smith can be reached at brian.smith@peninsulaclarion.com.