

Tesoro cited for incident at Nikiski oil loading dock

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By Brian Smith

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An incident described as a "near miss" involving an oil tanker loading cargo during winter ice conditions and heavy tidal currents has warranted a violation notice from the state and corrective measures from Tesoro.

Details have recently surfaced after the Jan. 13 incident involving the oil tanker Overseas Martinez, the tug aiding it and the ice-scouting vessel dedicated to watching out for ice conditions in Cook Inlet as the tanker was docked and conducting cargo operations.

Failure of the tug's engines caused it to damage and pull the tanker along the dock due to fast currents and increasing ice. However, the incident did not result in broken lines or the ship leaving the dock, but did result in damages to its railing.

It is the third time in the last six years an incident involving an oil tanker has occurred at the Kenai Pipeline dock in Nikiski during winter months. A 2006 incident resulted in the Seabulk Pride being ripped from the dock and landing on the beach with 5 million gallons of product onboard in addition to its own fuel supply.

In 2007, the same tanker was pulled from the dock again but was able to start its engines and avoid being beached.

Tesoro officials said they are confident it is safe to load cargo at the dock with the corrective measures taken after the most recent incident.

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On Jan. 13 at about 6 a.m., crews reported ice -- slush to solid pan -- visible around the tanker Overseas Martinez as it was docked and loading oil, according to Tesoro documents filed with the state.

Ice started to quickly increase in density around the tanker and the tug Vigilant, which was in place to assist the Overseas Martinez in operations off its starboard shoulder with a line connecting the two.

A crewman on the tanker noticed the system monitoring the strain on the ship's mooring lines were green with a steady strain of 15 tons. But four minutes later, the strain increased, peaking at 30 tons due to the current, tide and increasing presence of ice. Crews attempted to move the Vigilant into position to take the load off the tanker's mooring lines, but the tug's starboard engine overheated and lost power.

News of the motor's failure prompted the tanker's crew to order the tug to retrieve its line, but while attempting to position itself to do so, the tug's port engine also lost power leaving it powerless. The tug drifted alongside the OS Martinez causing the assist line to rip off about 45 feet of the ship's railing and rip the chock from the tanker's deck. No one was injured, but the weight of the tug pulled the tanker alongside the dock about 15 feet.

Within 45 seconds, the tanker's engines started, crews shut down cargo operations and the tanker moved forward to relieve the stress on the mooring lines.

After removing the tanker's hose, the tug regained power and crews were able to un-tether it from the tanker. It was determined the tug's sea chest vent iced up during the incident.

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The incident warranted a notice of violation from the Alaska Department of Environmental Conservation filed on Jan. 27.

The notice states Tesoro violated its oil discharge prevention and contingency plan by continuing to transfer oil products during tidal and ice conditions that the plan prohibits. The plan calls for Tesoro to discontinue all transfer operations when the tanker is encountering ice and tidal currents exceed four knots, both of which happened during the incident.

The notice of violation ordered Tesoro to perform an investigation of the incident that lead to the emergency shutdown of cargo loading and submit an analysis of the investigation with action to be taken to prevent further occurrences.

John Kotula, DEC Marine Vessels Section Manager, said Tesoro will not face a fine for the incident. The state's main intent was to make sure the company did an "extremely thorough investigation," he said.

"They did a real good job of following it up not only through their actions, but with their contractor Crowley as well in looking at all the different components that came into play there," he said.

Capt. Marc Bayer, general manager of shipping operations for Tesoro, said in a recent phone interview with the Clarion that the company will no longer transfer cargo when the tidal current is predicted to be four knots or greater during the hours of darkness and twilight in Phase 2 ice conditions, whether or not the ship is encountering ice.

"We are not going to leave it up to anybody to decide if ice is present or not," he said.

Tesoro wrote in its response to the state's violation notice that crews said the ice training they received "stressed that the procedures were guidelines and not the rule." Tesoro said it would amend its training to address the procedures set by the U.S. Coast Guard as rules and not guidelines.

"In the interest of cooperation with industry, (the Coast Guard) issued what are called Phase 2 guidelines and that's how we understood them," Bayer said. "There was a little misinterpretation between our contingency plan ... and the Phase 2 guidelines, which we have adopted as rules in our contingency plan.

"We no longer call them guidelines even though that's exactly what they are. We call them rules."

David Mosley, a U.S. Coast Guard first class petty officer and public affairs specialist, agreed the Coast Guard's annually updated procedures for Phase 2 ice conditions are guidelines and not laws.

"The guidelines are more industry self-enforcement," he said.

Said Kotula, "They were in violation of the state-approved contingency plan and the winter ice rules are guidelines, but in the contingency plan (Tesoro) provides to the state, they say they will follow those guidelines."

Tesoro also outlined there was no communication between an ice-scouting vessel ahead of the tanker for three and a half hours before the incident and the captain and pilot of the Overseas Martinez were unaware of the ice concentration ahead of the vessel.

"I don't want to speak to why that occurred, but, what I will say is that we've taken measures to make sure that will never happen again," Bayer said, adding the tanker and the scouting vessel will now communicate at a minimum of once an hour.

Bayer also said Tesoro has moved the tug's sea chest vents from outside to inside the engine room in hopes of avoiding a similar loss of power and is reviewing modifying the tug by eliminating its raw water cooling system.

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The forelands area of Cook Inlet -- where two land masses stick out into the water creating a narrower passage -- is known for its fast currents and more condensed ice accumulation.

Kotula said the area and tanker's docking situation are somewhat unique in the state. However, the state looks at the safeguards in place to "make sure it is a safe operation," he said.

"We haven't really had a lot of problems," Kotula said. "I think all the safeguards that are in place are working."

Cook Inletkeeper's Bob Shavelson said his organization is concerned about the incident.

"They responded quickly, they were definitely on it," he said. "But again, there was a breakdown in communications, and they ignored the rule."

Added Shavelson, "If you need a high-powered tug to keep a tanker on a dock, then you shouldn't be at that dock."

Jerry Rombach, Director of Public Outreach for Cook Inlet Regional Citizens Advisory Council, said the organization is comfortable with Tesoro's response to the incident, but will continue to monitor activity at the dock.

"We are always concerned when there is an incident, of course, but we feel that both the explanation provided by the company and the regulatory agencies satisfies us," he said. "The operation, the response and the reporting procedures were not only adequate, but appropriate.

"Incidents are going to occur and we feel the preparation and precautions taken were the right ones and the response was adequate and appropriate.

Bayer said he is "confident this is a manageable place to have a terminal."

"It was never in any danger of coming free of the dock, he said. "Everything worked the way it is supposed to work when an incident occurs."

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