

Alaska Dispatch News

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Coming flood of abandoned and derelict vessels demands Alaska's attention

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On March 14, the Community & Regional Affairs Committee heard House Bill 131 in Juneau. This bill, introduced by Rep. Seaton, brought forward through resolution by the Alaska Association of Harbormasters and Port Administrators, and further pushed ahead by Cook Inletkeeper, takes a first step towards improving the ability of municipalities and state agencies to deal effectively with abandoned and derelict vessels along Alaska's vast coastline.

We've all seen old and abandoned vessels in harbors around Alaska. Many of us have also seen rusted old vessels along our coastline, abandoned in public waters. These vessels are not just an eyesore. Fuel, hydraulic and engine oils, lead paints, copper-based antifouling paints and other toxic materials are usually always found onboard. When the vessels are compromised by fire, sinking, weather or other events those toxins end up in our waters. We know that even small amounts of hydrocarbons in the water can harm fish embryos and other aquatic life. Abandoned and derelict vessels are pollution spills just waiting to happen.

This past December we had just such an event occur here in Kachemak Bay. Two vessels, the F/V Kuperonoff and the F/V Leading Lady, sank in Jakolof Bay. Presumably taken down by heavy snow loads, these vessels sank with fuel on board and released diesel and other oils into the Bay – a Critical Habitat Area and home to over a dozen commercial oyster farms. The sinking of these two vessels has required local growers to undergo expensive testing for hydrocarbon compounds before their products can be sold again, and it's unclear at this point who is left with that bill. In a stroke of luck, probably due to the elevated status of Kachemak Bay as a CHA and aquaculture center, the Alaska Department of Natural Resources stepped up to the plate to remove both vessels. Why should this be considered a stroke of luck?

The US Coast Guard is able to mark abandoned and derelict vessels that are a navigational hazard and remove large abandoned barges in some circumstances. USCG is also concerned with abandoned and derelict vessels insofar as they present a pollution threat. Unfortunately the definition of a pollution threat stops at bulk fuels and other obvious sources of fuels and oils. It doesn't include lead paints, leaking engine oils, and other smaller and more persistent forms of pollution, not to mention the abandonment of substantial marine debris in public waters. If there is no one available to take ownership of vessels such as those recently sunk in Jakolof Bay, the Coast Guard can raise them, remove the bulk of the fuels and pollutants they find, and then leave them to sink again. Thankfully in the case of the Jakolof sinkings, the Alaska Dept. of Natural Resources stepped up to the plate. Through a myriad of bureaucratic paperwork the Dept. of Transportation transferred authority to DNR to take ownership of the vessels once they were raised by the Coast Guard. This allowed them to be towed into the Homer Harbor, where they waited for the next available tide to be hauled out to a local boatyard in January.

This incident highlights the fact that the state of Alaska currently lacks any coordinated plan of action for dealing with such vessels in state waters. Many coastal municipalities lack the legal framework within their municipal codes to navigate the seas of maritime law to effectively deal with these vessels. We can and should look to states like Washington, where the state has spent millions of dollars dealing with abandoned vessels on the coast, thus catalyzing legislative action to coordinate efforts and provide funding structures to address these real environmental and financial concerns. Cook Inletkeeper helped to move forward the introduction of House Bill 131, currently on the floor in Juneau. This bill will alleviate some of the legal hurdles that face our state agencies & municipalities when dealing with abandoned and derelict vessels, but it's really only a first step on a long road that lies ahead.

Alaska has enjoyed a relatively young fleet of actively working vessels. This is increasingly not the case as our fleet ages, and as we look ahead into the not-too-distant future we likely will be drowning (no pun intended) in derelicts. Not only a problem in our municipal harbors, these vessels are increasingly

littering our coastline and sharing the water with our fish and shellfish. Beyond HB131 we will continue working with stakeholders to develop ideas and actions to improve our ability to protect the marine environment and deal with these vessels in state and local waters. Stay tuned for more action on this issue from Cook Inletkeeper, Alaska Clean Harbors and many others from around the state.

Rachel Lord is the outreach and monitoring coordinator at Cook Inletkeeper. She works with the Homer Port and Harbor to achieve the first Clean Harbor Certification in the state.

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Comments
