

Alaska News

For months, Carnival Corp. has withheld water pollution data from Alaska regulators

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A cruise ship docks in Skagway during the 2025 summer season. Federal data shows the ship, which is named the Koningsdam, is among more than a dozen that have reported violations of scrubber discharge limits in recent years. (Avery Ellfeldt/KHNS)

Annie Goodenough spends her summers traveling the Alaska coast on cruise ships.

But she's not there for glacier views or whale sightings. She's a state inspector, tasked with ensuring the ships aren't endangering Alaska's natural marvels.

One afternoon last September, Goodenough boarded the Discovery Princess in Ketchikan for a routine review.

Once underway, Goodenough noticed a sheen on the water that she thought may have been coming from the ship's open-loop scrubbers, a technology that's been [criticized for reducing air pollution](#) by converting it into water pollution. The next morning, she saw sooty, black globs coming from the scrubber discharge point.

In both cases, Goodenough asked to review the ship's scrubber data to see if something was wrong. Twice, staff denied her request — but told her everything was working as it should.

“The inspector was not permitted to review the compliance data to verify that there were no exceedances,” her [inspection report](#) says.

As it turns out, there were exceedances on those days. According to the ship's [annual report](#) to the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, published in February, the ship's scrubber wash water exceeded federal limits at some point on both Sept. 2 and 3, the same period Goodenough was on board.



Black chunks with scrubber wash water in September 2025. (Alaska Department of Environmental Conservation)

Goodenough declined to comment for this story. But more than a dozen inspection reports reviewed by KHNS indicate that at least four other ships, all operated by parent company Carnival Corp., declined to comply with similar requests.

Those reports, along with [documents obtained](#) by KHNS [through a records request](#), show that Alaska's largest cruise ship operator for months refused to provide state regulators with data about a major source of water pollution.

Combined with Carnival's fraught environmental record, the move is raising concerns about the lack of transparency – and what's really going on with the systems, which can produce more than 3,000 metric tons of wash water per hour.

“The fact that they’re not sharing (the data) leads you in a couple of directions,” said Jim Gamble, who directs Pacific Environment’s Arctic program.

“One is that there are more violations than folks are aware of. And the other one is that they’re not keeping the data as accurately or as often as they’re supposed to,” Gamble added. “Or, you know, they’re hiding something.”

Hundreds of violations a year, but little enforcement

Carnival is one of the world’s largest cruise operators. But in Alaska, it’s the biggest by a long shot.

The Miami-based company owns five cruise lines that operate in state waters: Carnival Cruise Line, Princess Cruises, Holland America Line, Seabourn and Cunard.

They make up more than 40% of Alaska’s large cruise ship fleet and can bring hundreds of thousands of tourists to the state every year. Carnival ships are also the only ones in Alaska that use open-loop scrubbers.

The dispute between the company and the state is just one example of growing tensions over the proliferation of open-loop scrubbers around the world.

The situation stems from global air pollution requirements that took effect in 2020.

The rules sought to reduce sulfur emissions. But rather than using more expensive, cleaner fuels to comply, some cruise and shipping companies installed open-loop scrubbers.

The systems use seawater to remove contaminants from ship exhaust before diluting them and releasing the resulting wash water into the ocean. That process,

research shows, can be toxic for marine life – including tiny organisms that make up the bottom of the food chain.

“From the scientific perspective, there is not really a need for more data; it is already clear that wide scale use of scrubbers and discharge of scrubber effluent will contribute to the degradation of the ecosystem,” Ida-Maja Hassellöv, a researcher with Sweden’s Chalmers University of Technology, wrote in an email.



The Alaska Marine Highway System’s MV Hubbard between Haines and Skagway in January 2026. (Avery Ellfeldt/KHNS)

A permit managed by the EPA sets limits for the pollutants in scrubber wash water and requires vessels to report violations. But as it turns out, violations happen all the time. Between 2023 and 2024, 17 Carnival ships that operate in Alaska reported more than 700, KHNS previously reported.

Still, those reports don't include details such as when and where ships are discharging or how egregious the violations actually are, which is why the Alaska Department of Environmental Conservation is asking for more information. EPA, for its part, has rarely enforced its own permit.

"I can't really speak for EPA," Gene McCabe, the director of DEC's water division, said in a recent interview. "But, quite honestly, scrubber discharge is a known quantity, and we have the obligation to know what's going on in our waters."

An EPA spokesperson said in an emailed statement that the agency "enforces vessel general permits," but can't "comment on potential or pending enforcement actions."

A dispute over water samples

The back-and-forth between the company and state started with a new request by DEC.

While inspectors had previously been permitted to review data that tracks scrubber activity, 2025 was the first year that DEC asked to take direct samples of scrubber wash water while onboard.

But during inspections on at least three Carnival-owned ships, staff declined to allow sampling or to share scrubber data. In two more cases that year, inspectors didn't ask for samples but still weren't allowed to look at scrubber data.

Carnival outlined its concerns about the inspections in a September letter to the department. The company said the requests were "unusual and unexpected," and that it wanted more information about DEC's scrubber-related goals and authority "before any ships within the Carnival fleet will agree to participate."

The company made the case that, while state law gives DEC authority over wastewater including sewage and greywater, the same is not true for scrubber discharge.

The letter also brought up the state's Ocean Rangers program, a now-defunded program that used to place marine engineers on ships to keep an eye out for environmental compliance.

The program is still written into state law. But Gov. Mike Dunleavy vetoed its funding in 2019. Carnival argued that while Ocean Rangers may have had some authority to collect scrubber wash water samples and data, DEC inspectors do not.



Cruise ship visitors exit the Discovery Princess in downtown Juneau on June 10, 2024. (Clarise Larson/KTOO)

The letter [elicited a sharp response](#) from DEC Commissioner Randy Bates. He wrote Carnival back in December and accused the company of “misreading” state law and drawing a “fictional line” between DEC and the Ocean Rangers program.

“Without question, DEC has the authority to request and review the information and data requested, and Carnival has the obligation to provide that information and data,” Bates wrote.

Bates cited a state statute that requires cruise ships in Alaska that discharge wastewater to provide DEC with information related to a long list of issues. They include “pollution avoidance, and pollution reduction measures” – which scrubbers are.

Now, four months later, DEC and the company are in talks about a potential way forward. But Carnival still has not provided data about its scrubber systems to the state.

Carnival said in an email that it directed the state to publicly available samples it provides to EPA once a year, plus several “peer-reviewed studies proving (open-loop scrubbers are) safe and effective.”

“We’re always open to sharing data and being transparent, and that starts with following rigorous scientific protocols to produce accurate, reliable results,” the company said. “We chose not to move forward with sampling that fell outside of established protocols.”

Violations, fines and felonies

Carnival has a long history of environmental violations, which have led to fines in Alaska and felony convictions in federal court.

In 2016, Carnival subsidiary Princess Cruise Lines pleaded guilty to seven felony charges, all related to “deliberate pollution of the seas and intentional acts to cover it up,” according to the U.S. Department of Justice. The investigation was kickstarted by a whistleblower report that a Princess ship had illegally discharged oily waste near the coast of England.

Princess paid a [\\$40 million penalty](#). And as part of the plea deal, Carnival agreed to participate in a court-supervised probation program for five years.

Then, in 2019, Princess and Carnival paid another [\\$20 million](#) after admitting they had repeatedly violated the terms of that probation.

“This is not just a one-off,” said Anna Barford, a campaigner with the environmental group Stand.earth. “This is a group (of cruise lines) led by a multi-time federal felon for discharging illegally, falsifying records and doing things like illegally preparing for inspections.”

There’s a [long list of violations](#) in Alaska, too. They include exceedances of state standards related to air quality, sewage and graywater disposal – plus one federal fine specifically tied to open-loop scrubbers.

The company started installing the systems on its ships in 2014. In 2016, all but one of its Alaska cruise ships had violated federal acidity standards, [according to federal documents](#). EPA took a few steps in response. The agency fined the multibillion-dollar company \$14,500 and required it to undertake a \$75,000 water quality monitoring project.

But EPA also loosened its acidity standards to help Carnival comply while the company worked to improve its systems. The looser limits from 2017 “are still in place and only apply to Carnival vessels operating in Alaska waters,” a spokesperson confirmed by email in September.

Gamble, of Pacific Environment, said environmental violations by the industry have become a longstanding pattern for two reasons.

“A, it is hard to get information on what’s actually happening,” he said. “And B, when you do have clear data that shows violations, the penalties are not very significant.”

‘We can’t sample the whole ocean’

Insufficient information is why the state has started asking for more information in the first place.

Wash water samples would reveal what exactly the ships are discharging. And cruise ships maintain detailed records of when the systems turn on and off, where vessels are located when exceedances happen, and how long those last. The information could help the agency pinpoint patterns — and potential problem areas.

“We can’t sample the whole ocean, right?” said McCabe, the DEC water division director.



The Holland America cruise ship Zaandam docked in Juneau on June 22, 2018. (Adelyn Baxter/KTOO)

The back-and-forth between DEC and Carnival has led to negotiations about a joint sampling program and study. Carnival confirmed in an email that the company is “still considering” co-designing a study by a “mutually agreed, certified lab with the technical expertise to follow globally established IMO and EPA testing standards.”

McCabe said DEC and the company are still working out the details, but that negotiations are “coming along” and that a joint effort would be a “win-win.”

But multiple people interviewed for this story took issue with past industry-backed studies, which they said have generally painted a rosier picture of scrubbers than independent academic research.

The Cruise Lines International Association, for instance, helped design [a 2024 study](#) focused on Washington state's Puget Sound.

The study did acknowledge potential impact to marine life from components of scrubber discharge, including petroleum hydrocarbons. But the report concluded that, after accounting for dilution and other factors, there is “minimal potential for ecological risk.”

The Washington Department of Ecology identified a range of concerns with the report. Among them: The study relied heavily on dilution and failed to account for the buildup of toxins from many ships over many years.

“The upshot is that we didn't fully agree with the conclusions in the draft report,” said Amy Jankowiak, who leads the work on discharge pollution. “We provided comments and concerns, and it has not been finalized at this point.”

There's a general consensus among researchers and environmentalists that, while scrubber discharge is not a good thing for the ocean, more data would be helpful for understanding how scrubbers work in practice — and how they're affecting different ecosystems.

For now, the state hopes to answer those questions by collaborating with the industry. But advocates say that more research shouldn't distract from the reality that Carnival has routinely violated federal limits.

“I just want it to be clear to Alaskans — and I want legislators to also understand — that Carnival has been out of compliance since day one,” said Aaron Brakel, of the Southeast Alaska Conservation Council.

Regulators should respond accordingly, industry watchdogs argue.

“This is how, unfortunately, the cruise industry behaves,” said Marcie Keever, an attorney who worked with Friends of the Earth on cruise issues for nearly two decades. “I really do believe that regulation and oversight and enforcement is the only way we’re going to keep this industry from dumping at will in our valuable ocean waters.”

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