

AlaskaDispatch

News and voices from the Last Frontier

Published on *Alaska Dispatch* (<http://www.alaskadispatch.com/>)

[Home](#) > Cordova harbor saga ends: Polluted, abandoned vessel finally removed

Jennifer Gibbins

December 28, 2011

CORDOVA -- Something is missing from the Cordova harbor and at least this time, it's not another finger float hammered by the north wind. Earlier this month, the Sound Developer, a 117-foot landing craft, left from the harbor under tow by the tug Oswell Foss.

For more than two years, the vessel sat sunken in the Cordova harbor, quietly spewing pollution and posing a potential threat to navigation. It became a poster child for the national issue of derelict vessels. The Sound Developer has been discussed at meetings of the Alaska Association of Harbor Masters and Port Administrators, written about by state-wide news outlets and cautiously watched by those far beyond. The core issue: funding.

U.S. harbors are faced with a lose-lose proposition when dealing with negligent vessel owners. If a harbor impounds or seizes a vessel, even temporarily to enforce late slip fees, the harbor assumes liability. As a result, many harbors are reluctant to take control. Vessels deteriorate further and are abandoned, leaving the community to deal with costly removal, cleaning and disposal.

The bill for removing and cleaning the Sound Developer -- not including disposal of the vessel, which falls to the city of Cordova -- was in the neighborhood of \$1.2 million, paid for through the oil spill liability trust fund.

When the vessel sank in August 2009, a Cordova company named Alaska Marine Response (AMR) moved in to contain and remove pollution at the site. As the situation unfolded, and the vessel was abandoned by its owner, the city and U.S. Coast Guard worked together to develop a strategy for removal. Because of the vessel's condition, Global Diving and Salvage was contracted to remove the vessel and a failed attempt was made later that fall. Timing, tides and weather conspired against the removal. With winter closing in, the partners stepped back to reassess.

Over the next two years, another plan was tediously vetted through naval architects, Global's engineers and through every level of the Coast Guard as the town waited anxiously. AMR continued to contain and remove pollution from the site. Finally, the Coast Guard issued its approval.

“The biggest challenge we had with this project was the unknown,” said Kerry Walsh, Global Diving and Salvage. “Unknowns included condition, structure and contents.”

In the absence of drawings or any real information about the structure of the Sound Developer, aside from its horrendous condition, Global’s engineers relied on the little information they could garner through examination of her sister ship, lying ashore in Seward. One option for removal involved using a heavy lift crane, a sure way to go but also the most expensive. Using heavy lift bags to float the vessel was the other option -- and the one selected.

According to Walsh, divers created a basket around the vessel by running cables underneath and connecting them with chains. More than 30 heavy lift bags were staged on the scene, inflated and attached to the basket. Staging of the bags was a complex process itself with each bag weighing in excess of 500 pounds.

Floatation of the vessel had to be tested, and then timed with the tides. On the initial test float, the vessel proved to be far heavier than anticipated, temporarily dashing hopes of success. More heavy lift bags were added to the bow for additional flotation. On the day the team planned to tow the Sound Developer to its new temporary location adjacent to the travel lift, the weather kicked up and the move was delayed.

Finally, late on the afternoon of Dec. 8, the Sound Developer, towed by Oswell Foss and accompanied by three bowpickers, made her final trip out of the Cordova harbor. People lined the surrounding docks, taking photos and video, cheering and clapping as the Sound Developer passed beyond the breakwater.

When the flotilla arrived at the other end of town, people stood on the ferry dock, along the shoreline and sat in their cars watching as she was staged on the mudflats and boomed off for an exterior pressure wash.

Asked to describe what divers have found on board, Walsh jokes, “Mason jars of gold.”

“We found a real mess,” said Walsh. “Everything from 55 gallon drums of unknown material to debris and trash; countless batteries and bags of disposed used oil that folks had flung on board. That is another typical problem with abandoned vessels, they become a convenient dumping ground.”

As crews prepared to tackle the interior of the vessel earlier this week, Walsh added, “There is a lot of accumulated sludge in the hull. How much of a mess we are dealing with is yet to be fully realized.”

Walsh was pleased.

“The Coast Guard asked Global to develop a plan with a simple but clear end result of removing the vessel. That is our area of expertise, that is why they hired us and we delivered.

“Most importantly,” added Walsh, “the Coast Guard had a desire to finish what they started and to do Cordova good.”

This story was first published The Cordova Times.

Source URL: <http://www.alaskadispatch.com/article/cordova-harbor-saga-ends-polluted-abandoned-vessel-finally-removed>