



Arctic military policy discussed

Adm. talks Polar Sea, USCG activities at Capitol hearing

Posted: February 15, 2013 - 12:06am

By MARK D. MILLER

JUNEAU EMPIRE

A heavy polar icebreaker reactivated last December will be ready for service by summer, United States Coast Guard Rear Adm. Thomas Ostebo told members of the Alaska State Legislature's joint Armed Services Committee during its first meeting of the year Thursday.

Ostebo, along with U.S. Air Force Lt. Gen. Stephen L. Hoog, commander of Alaskan Command, and U.S. Army Major Gen. Thomas Katkus, commissioner of the Alaska Department of Military and Veterans Affairs, testified before the committee on the status of the U.S. military in Alaska.

The USCGC Polar Star is being readied for active duty now, according to Ostebo, who is the commander of Coast Guard District 17.

"She'll be back in service by next summer, with some early run-up work taking place up here in Alaska," said Ostebo, responding to a question from Sen. Fred Dyson, R-Eagle River. "She comes up here to break some ice and get her crews trained up, and then she'll be turning down towards Antarctica to help with the McMurdo (Sound) breakout next winter."

Ostebo is based in Juneau, from which he oversees Coast Guard operations for all of Alaska.

The USCGC Healy, the Coast Guard's only active polar icebreaker, made port in Juneau last fall on its way down to Seattle for maintenance.

Ostebo praised the Healy as "extremely valuable," but added, "Healy, while quite capable, is limited in her icebreaking capabilities. She is technically a medium icebreaker."

Polar Star and its sister ship, Polar Sea, which Ostebo said is in "caretaker status" right now with no plans to reactivate it, are the largest icebreakers in the world not powered by a nuclear reactor.

During his presentation, Ostebo discussed other Coast Guard activities in the Arctic, such as last year's Arctic Shield exercise, which Hoog also talked about.

Arctic Shield, which spanned February to October 2012, saw an unprecedented level of Coast Guard resources shifted to Alaska's North Slope, above the Arctic Circle and far from the major Coast Guard installations in Kodiak and Sitka. Among other scenarios, it simulated an oil spill near Barrow, testing Coast Guard and U.S. Navy water skimming equipment to assess how the military would handle an actual spill.

"We successfully deployed and operated both Coast Guard and (Department of Defense) skimming equipment from a Coast Guard cutter," said Hoog. "This was the first time DoD equipment had been used in this fashion in Alaska. We captured many lessons learned with regard to execution and logistics."

Unlike the other four branches of the U.S. military, which operate under the Department of Defense, the Coast Guard is under the jurisdiction of the Department of Homeland Security. Despite this division, in Alaska and elsewhere — including the Afghanistan warzone — the Coast Guard works together closely with the Army, Navy, Air Force and U.S. Marine Corps, a point reiterated by Ostebo, Hoog and Katkus throughout their presentations.

In the case of Arctic Shield, Ostebo said the mission was devised by District 17 personnel "to respond to the dramatic increases in Arctic activity" in recent years. He called it "a resounding success."

"The lessons learned and the experience gained from our activities north of the Arctic Circle will help refine and improve the Coast Guard's Arctic presence," said Ostebo.

Rep. Dan Saddler, R-Eagle River, who chaired the committee meeting, asked about the Coast Guard's future Arctic plans.

"Given the increasing outer continental shelf activity ... and the increased shipping along the great circle route and the Northwest Passage and the northern route, what are the long-term plans for any permanent Coast Guard presence in or near the Arctic?" Saddler asked. "Kodiak's great, but it's a little far away."

"Part of the mission of Arctic Shield 2012 was to evaluate our response capability and the assets that we have to provide a long-term presence in the Arctic," Ostebo responded. "Clearly, every indication is that the Arctic will continue to grow in its relevance in the maritime community, and the Coast Guard is evaluating our strategic and long-term presence up there — both off-shore, with more and better capable ships, as well as on-shore presence,

primarily with a seasonal air facility.”

Increasing traffic across maritime boundaries like Dixon Entrance and Unimak Pass poses another “very specific and very interesting problem” for the Coast Guard, which is tasked with responding to “maritime accidents” that could could casualties or environmental damage, Ostebo told the committee.

“I probably don’t have to remind most of the folks here (of) tragedies that we’ve had in the past,” said Ostebo. “They give me pause and concern for the international strait known as Unimak Pass and for the international strait known as Dixon Entrance, both of which have had major growth in maritime traffic.”

Ostebo also talked about the Coast Guard’s role in responding to the grounding of the drill ship Kulluk off Kodiak Island last December.

“I’m proud to report that as of today, our two main goals in this mission ... have been accomplished,” Ostebo said. “And that first goal was ... nobody gets killed and we don’t get anybody hurt. And number two is we have no environmental damage and no pollution. And both of those objectives have been, as of today, completed.”

- Contact reporter Mark D. Miller at 586-1821 or at mark.d.miller@juneauempire.com.

[Comment](#)[Back to Top](#)[Follow This Article](#)

CLOSE X