

**ALASKA STATE LEGISLATURE
HOUSE TRANSPORTATION STANDING COMMITTEE**

February 11, 2025

1:38 p.m.

MEMBERS PRESENT

Representative Ashley Carrick, Co-Chair
Representative Ted Eischeid, Co-Chair
Representative Genevieve Mina
Representative Louise Stutes
Representative Kevin McCabe
Representative Elexie Moore

MEMBERS ABSENT

Representative Cathy Tilton

COMMITTEE CALENDAR

PRESENTATION: INTRO TO THE ALASKA MARINE HIGHWAY SYSTEM'S LONG-RANGE PLAN

- HEARD

PREVIOUS COMMITTEE ACTION

No previous action to record

WITNESS REGISTER

CRAIG TORNGA, Marine Director
Alaska Marine Highway System
Department of Transportation and Public Facilities
Ketchikan, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Gave a PowerPoint presentation on the Alaska Marine Highway System's long-range plan.

ACTION NARRATIVE

[1:38:02 PM](#)

CO-CHAIR ASHLEY CARRICK called the House Transportation Standing Committee meeting to order at 1:38 p.m. Representatives Mina, Stutes, McCabe, Moore, Eischeid, and Carrick were present at the call to order.

PRESENTATION: Intro to the Alaska Marine Highway System's Long-range Plan

[1:38:42 PM](#)

CO-CHAIR CARRICK announced that the only order of business would be a presentation on the Alaska Marine Highway System's long-range plan.

[1:39:24 PM](#)

CRAIG TORNGA, Marine Director, Alaska Marine Highway System (AMHS), Department of Transportation and Public Facilities, gave a PowerPoint presentation on the Alaska Marine Highway System's long-range plan [hard copy included in the committee packet]. He began the presentation on slide 6, pointing out AMHS's safety goal of "no harm to people, environment, and equipment." He stated that in 2024, there were 51 injuries to crew, no spills to the water, and no allisions or collisions.

MR. TORNGA, in response to a series of committee questions, said that many of the crew injuries happened on the deck. He discussed several examples of crew injuries, noting that AMHS needs to improve its system of reporting injuries. In response to a question about injuries from absorption, ingestion, or inhalation, he clarified that this would be related to working with fumes or liquids without the proper personal protective equipment (PPE). He continued that a repetitive motion injury would be from repeatedly doing a task. He explained the eye injury and finger injury that were listed on the slide. He added that not all 51 injuries to crewmembers were "lost time" injuries. He defined allision is a strike with a stationary object. He responded that there was a whale collision in 2023, but there had been none in 2024.

[1:47:55 PM](#)

MR. TORNGA moved to slide 7. Concerning reliability, he pointed out that vessels have had extended delays in the shipyard because of steel wastage. He explained that this wastage continually occurs because of the age of the fleet, and the steel must be replaced, which has significant costs. Concerning AMHS updates, he stated that the computer maintenance management system (CMMS) was implemented in 2024. He explained that this system would be setting the foundation for a preventative maintenance program for the new vessels. He spoke to AMHS's uptime and downtime percentages. Excluding shipyard downtimes,

he pointed out that in 2024 there was only a 2 percent downtime. He expressed the opinion that this is a very good percentage. He described preventative maintenance is a disciplined program, as there are thousands of parts listed in CMMS for the vessels' engines, generators, and more. He expressed appreciation for the vessel engineers and their hard work.

[1:51:25 PM](#)

MR. TORNGA, in response to a question from Representative Mina concerning reliability metrics, stated that the downtime statistic on slide 7 is based on mechanical reliability. He described other reasons that ferries could be delayed, such as late departures, load-time delays, and community-requested schedule adjustments. He stated that AMHS's long-range plan is for these delays to be tracked. In response to a follow-up question, he stated that slide 7 does not represent all the maintenance vessels would need to provide reliable service. He discussed the fire main issue that resulted in the MV Columbia being out of commission for the entire year. He noted that the MV Aurora would be out for an extended time for the same reason. He also pointed out that the MV LeConte would be out of service because of the need to replace sections on the car deck. He further discussed the scheduling problems when vessels are out of commission.

MR. TORNGA, in response to a question from Representative Stutes, said that CMMS is the preventative maintenance module of the Original Equipment Manufacturer (OEM) system. He stated that a server has been put on every vessel to be used as a maintenance tool. He added that this would also help with adherence to the American Bureau of Shipping standards.

MR. TORNGA moved to slide 8 and pointed out AMHS's hiring statistics. He noted that in 2024, AMHS hired 7 masters, mates, and pilots, while 11 separated. He stated that deck officers are trained within the system, and AMHS must "be reloading all the time" for these positions. He commented that maintaining marine engineers "is a real challenge," as 8 separated with only 1 new hire. He noted that the Marine Engineers' Beneficial Association (MEBA) has a hiring hall where temporary workers could be dispatched. He noted that these people "love to come" to Alaska, as they can make overtime wages. He noted that there has not been a problem with keeping Inlandboatmen's Union (IBU) personnel, which includes stewards and deck workers.

[2:02:40 PM](#)

MR. TORNGA, in response to a question from Co-Chair Carrick concerning the decrease in retention rates, expressed the opinion that the vacancy rates would not go down until there are changes in the hiring system. He pointed out that if IBU personnel stay nine months, they would receive a sign-on bonus. He stated that the focus has been to hire instate crew, as they tend to stay longer. He noted AMHS has been making agreements with communities to provide travel pay for individuals who want to live in their communities while working for the ferry system. In response to a follow-up question, he expressed uncertainty concerning the ferry system's vacancy rate in 2010 and 2011, which had been AMHS's peak period. He expressed the understanding that during this time, jobs on the ferries were difficult to obtain. He noted that currently there is a national shortage for marine industry workers, and hiring new employees has become highly competitive.

MR. TORNGA, in response to a question from Representative McCabe concerning any restrictions in the collective bargaining agreements for hiring, said that any hiring changes would need to be amended in the hiring contracts. In response to a follow-up question, he suggested that AMHS has both shared goals and differences with the unions. He pointed out that MEBA has been responsive to the need in Alaska. He noted that the International Organization of Master, Mates, and Pilots (MM&P) does not have a hiring hall like MEBA, while the hiring hall for IBU has not been responsive to the need. In response, he explained the process of working with the union halls. He noted that any contract would be made by AMHS's collective bargaining agreement, and he gave some details on this. He continued that union halls are also struggling because of the shortage of workers in the marine industry.

MR. TORNGA, in response to a question from Representative Stutes, said that AMHS would not pay the same wages as Washington State Ferries. He spoke about the similarities between the Washington system and AMHS. In response to a follow-up question concerning the difference between the wages for the two systems, he explained that wages would vary depending on the position. He noted that the largest wage gap would be for a master, as Washington State Ferries would pay this position 25 percent more.

[2:15:15 PM](#)

MR. TORNGA discussed AMHS crew position vacancies, as seen on slide 9. He moved to slide 10 and discussed capital projects, pointing out that additional crew quarters would be built on the MV Tazlina. He noted that the MV Columbia's project has been put on hold for risk assessment, while the MV Matanuska's project would be presented to the Alaska Marine Highway Operations Board for a decision. He stated that the MV Kennicott's generator upgrades are underway, and he noted the complexity of this project.

MR. TORNGA moved to slide 11 and discussed new vessel construction. He stated that AMHS has been meeting weekly with the Federal Transit Administration (FTA) on the following projects: the low-no emission ferry design, the mainline replacement vessel design, and MV Tustumena Replacement Vessel (TRV) construction project. He discussed the details of these projects and the process of going forward. He moved to slide 12 and described the timeline for the TRV project.

MR. TORNGA overviewed the long-range plan and the path to reliability, as seen on slide 13. He emphasized the goal of increasing the efficiency of the fleet. He noted the periods on the slide, with the new low-no vessel coming into service during the first period from 2025 to 2028. He added that port calls would begin to increase during this period. He pointed out that the new larger vessels and the dayboat would begin service during the period from 2029 to 2035. He explained that the larger vessels would require a different master's license, along with more crew. He noted that the new fleet design has taken these factors, along with efficiency, into consideration. He noted that the fleet would be smaller, but the vessels would have more port calls because they have been designed for the routes. He expressed the opinion that this would be more efficient and affordable for the state going forward. He said the draft of the long-range plan would be released to the public by the end of the month.

[2:23:34 PM](#)

MR. TORNGA, in response to a question from Representative Stutes, said that the FTA dollars awarded to AMHS projects would only be used for designated projects, not for operational costs.

MR. TORNGA, in response to a series of questions from Representative Mina, stated that AMHS would retain staff during the winter months because "right now we don't let anybody go because you'll never get them back." He expressed the opinion

that because of the difficulty in finding staff, this would be the strategy for all seasonal hires in other industries as well. He spoke about crews who work on the vessels while they are in the shipyard, doing jobs they were not necessarily hired for. Concerning ferry service to Sitka, he stated that the mainline vessel currently goes to Sitka weekly; however, it would not be a roundtrip back to Juneau. He noted that there has been discussion on building a road to Warm Springs, where a dayboat service could be provided to Juneau. He added that with the Native hospital being built in Sitka, the passage to Warm Springs would be popular with the other communities in the area. In response, he stated that the ferry service does not have a plan to go to the Bering Sea. He stated that the AMHS's long-term plan only looks at the historical ports of call.

MR. TORNGA, in response to a question from Representative McCabe concerning crew that train in Alaska and move to different areas for better pay, clarified that he was specifically speaking about MM&P members. He noted that this movement is normal, as it happens across the country with these members.

[2:33:04 PM](#)

MR. TORNGA, in response to a question from Co-Chair Carrick, said the plan is for every vessel in the fleet to have a Starlink system. He noted that several vessels already have units onboard for the CMMS system. He added that there would be systems set up for customers and for crews as well. He stated that it would take two-to-three years before every vessel has a system. In response to a question concerning additional ferry routes that are not in the long-range plan, he spoke about the popularity of the ferry route that ran across the Gulf of Alaska. He discussed the current feasibility for this, noting that now most of the ferries are not ocean-class vessels. He stated that two of the new ferries would have this capability. He spoke about the possibility of having floating docks, as this would give versatility to ports. In response to a follow-up question, he stated that AMHS does not currently collect data on passengers and the reason for their travel. He said some minor changes are being made to the online reservation system that could provide more passenger information.

MR. TORNGA, in response to a question from Co-Chair Eischeid on attracting staff with benefits, stated that AMHS is looking at all options within the budget restrictions. He explained that any new benefit would have to be analyzed for its real cost. He pointed out that many employees continue to work for the ferry

system because of their Tier I or Tier II status in the Public Employees' Retirement System. In response to a question concerning any new ideas to attract customers, he expressed the importance of reliability. He spoke in length about reliability and improvements to the AMHS service.

[2:54:03 PM](#)

MR. TORNGA, in response to a question from Representative Mina concerning extended ferry cancellations, stated that one recent cancellation was because of problems with the emergency generator on the MV Hubbard. He stated that these vessels could not sail without an emergency generator. He noted another cancellation of the MV Hubbard was because of problems with the main engine. He stated that both of these incidents occurred in Haines, resulting in the extended cancellations. He added that this had affected the AMHS's downtime statistics.

MR. TORNGA, in response to a question from Representative McCabe concerning retirement and benefits for AMHS staff, clarified that earlier in the meeting he was mostly speaking about captains and mates who have Tier I and Tier II status with the state. He added that there is a program for retired members of MM&P to return temporarily to work if they are needed.

[2:58:49 PM](#)

MR. TORNGA, in response to a question from Representative Mina concerning a ferry cancellation that had disrupted food transport to a village, stated that AMHS had provided a supplemental service to transport this food. He noted that the Central Council of the Tlingit and Haida Indian Tribes had been able to provide refrigerated storage until the food could be transported.

CO-CHAIR CARRICK thanked the presenter and the staff at AMHS. She gave closing comments.

[3:01:10 PM](#)

ADJOURNMENT

There being no further business before the committee, the House Transportation Standing Committee meeting was adjourned at 3:01 p.m.