

ALASKA STATE LEGISLATURE
HOUSE TRANSPORTATION STANDING COMMITTEE

April 22, 2025

1:01 p.m.

MEMBERS PRESENT

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

MEMBERS ABSENT

All members present

COMMITTEE

HOUSE JOINT RESOLUTION NO. 14

Supporting the completion of the Port MacKenzie Rail Extension and the Northern Rail Extension; supporting the increase in defensive capabilities at Fort Greely, Alaska; encouraging a renewed commitment by the Alaska Railroad to a community-minded approach to future rail expansion; and encouraging the development of critical Arctic infrastructure.

- HEARD & HELD

CS FOR SENATE JOINT RESOLUTION NO. 12 (TRA)

Urging the United States Congress and the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration to address outages of National Data Buoy Center stations.

- HEARD & HELD

PREVIOUS COMMITTEE ACTION

BILL: HJR 14

SHORT TITLE: PORT MACKENZIE & NORTHERN RAIL EXTENSIONS

SPONSOR(S): REPRESENTATIVE(S) MCCABE

03/21/25	(H)	READ THE FIRST TIME - REFERRALS
03/21/25	(H)	TRA
04/10/25	(H)	TRA AT 1:00 PM BARNES 124

04/10/25 (H) Heard & Held
04/10/25 (H) MINUTE (TRA)
04/22/25 (H) TRA AT 1:00 PM BARNES 124

BILL: SJR 12

SHORT TITLE: NOAA BUOY OUTAGES

SPONSOR(s): SENATOR(s) DUNBAR

02/26/25 (S) READ THE FIRST TIME - REFERRALS
02/26/25 (S) TRA
03/20/25 (S) TRA AT 1:30 PM BUTROVICH 205
03/20/25 (S) Heard & Held
03/20/25 (S) MINUTE (TRA)
03/25/25 (S) TRA AT 1:30 PM BUTROVICH 205
03/25/25 (S) Moved CSSJR 12 (TRA) Out of Committee
03/25/25 (S) MINUTE (TRA)
03/26/25 (S) TRA RPT CS 3DP SAME TITLE
03/26/25 (S) DP: BJORKMAN, KIEHL, TOBIN
04/04/25 (S) TRANSMITTED TO (H)
04/04/25 (S) VERSION: CSSJR 12 (TRA)
04/07/25 (H) READ THE FIRST TIME - REFERRALS
04/07/25 (H) TRA
04/15/25 (H) TRA AT 1:00 PM BARNES 124
04/15/25 (H) -- MEETING CANCELED --
04/22/25 (H) TRA AT 1:00 PM BARNES 124

WITNESS REGISTER

MEGHAN CLEMANS, Director
External Affairs
Alaska Railroad Corporation
Anchorage, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Answered questions on HJR 14; provided public testimony in support of HJR 14.

BRIAN LINDAMOOD, Chief Engineer
Alaska Railroad Corporation
Anchorage, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Answered questions on HJR 14.

SENATOR FORREST DUNBAR
Alaska State Legislature
Juneau, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: As prime sponsor, presented CSSJR 12 (TRA).

JOHN GUTHRIE, Project Manager
Maritime Operations

Prince William Sound Regional Citizens' Advisory Council
Valdez, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Gave invited testimony on CSSJR 12(TRA).

ROBERT ARCHIBALD, President
Prince William Sound Regional Citizens' Advisory Council
Homer, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Gave invited testimony on CSSJR 12(TRA).

ARIELLE WIGGEN, Staff
Senator Forrest Dunbar
Alaska State Legislature
Juneau, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: On behalf of Senator Dunbar, prime sponsor, answered questions on CSSJR 12(TRA).

ACTION NARRATIVE

[1:01:33 PM](#)

CO-CHAIR CARRICK called the House Transportation Standing Committee meeting to order at 1:01 p.m. Representatives Moore, Stutes, McCabe, Tilton, Eischeid, and Carrick were present at the call to order. Representative Mina arrived as the meeting was in progress.

HJR 14-PORT MACKENZIE & NORTHERN RAIL EXTENSIONS

[1:02:27 PM](#)

CO-CHAIR CARRICK announced that the first order of business would be HOUSE JOINT RESOLUTION NO. 14, Supporting the completion of the Port McKenzie Rail Extension and the Northern Rail Extension; supporting the increase in defensive capabilities at Fort Greely, Alaska; encouraging a renewed commitment by the Alaska Railroad to a community-minded approach to future rail expansion; and encouraging the development of critical Arctic infrastructure.

[1:03:02 PM](#)

REPRESENTATIVE KEVIN MCCABE, as prime sponsor, reviewed HJR 14. He explained that the proposed resolution would endorse two key infrastructure railroad expansion projects: the Northern Rail Extension and the Port MacKenzie Rail Extension. He expressed the opinion that the projects would strengthen Alaska's infrastructure and enhance national defense capabilities. He

added that these projects would open the state to needed resource development. He said that his office has received a "huge" number of letters supporting the proposed resolution.

[1:04:03 PM](#)

REPRESENTATIVE STUTES expressed support and questioned the cost of each component of HJR 14.

REPRESENTATIVE MCCABE answered that railroad engineers have given an estimate of \$290 million for the 32 miles of track from Port MacKenzie to just south of Houston. He stated that the Northern Rail Extension would be "significantly more," as a \$200 million bridge has been built already. He expressed the understanding that because of the several billion dollars needed to complete the extension to Canada, the money would need to be federal funds. In response to a follow-up question concerning the exact beginning and ending of the Northern Rail Extension project, he deferred to a representative from the Alaska Railroad.

[1:06:00 PM](#)

MEGHAN CLEMANS, Director, External Affairs, Alaska Railroad Corporation (ARRC), responded that the Northern Rail Extension would go 89 miles from the Eielson branch of the Alaska Railroad to Fort Greely and Delta Junction, but it would not reach the Canadian border. She said that the proposed line to the border crossing would follow the extension, so the extension would be an important step to reaching the border. In response to a follow-up question, she expressed uncertainty concerning the distance from Delta Junction to the Canadian border. She deferred to the chief engineer for ARRC.

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BRIAN LINDAMOOD, Chief Engineer, Alaska Railroad Corporation, estimated that from Delta Junction to the Canadian border would be around 160 miles, depending on the route.

[1:08:12 PM](#)

CO-CHAIR CARRICK opened public testimony on HJR 14.

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MS. CLEMANS, on behalf of ARRC, expressed support for the proposed resolution, adding that ARRC supports the expansion of rail infrastructure in the state. She indicated that the railroad has hired an outside engineering firm to update the cost of completing the Port MacKinzie project, and it has submitted federal grant applications for this project and the Northern Rail Extension project. For the Northern Rail Extension project, ARRC has submitted a spending request to Alaska's Congressional Delegation. She stated that ARRC has been working with the Matanuska-Susitna (Mat-Su) Borough, the Port MacKinzie staff, and Representative McCabe to identify potential customers and an anchor tenant for the Port MacKinzie project. In lieu of an anchor tenant, it has worked with stakeholders to develop a spending strategy, and ARRC plans to apply for a Consolidated Rail Infrastructure and Safety Improvements (CRISI) grant. She noted that the Mat-Su Borough would be submitting a Legislative Finance Capital Project Submission and Information System (CAPSIS) request for the needed 20 percent-nonmatching federal funds.

MS. CLEMANS noted ARRC's ongoing engagement with stakeholders to advocate for both projects. She expressed the belief that these projects would add new transportation efficiencies to the state, unlocking opportunities, such as resource exports, energy solutions, and project development. Noting the large size of the projects, she maintained that the projects would require the involvement and support of railroad partners. She stated that the proposed resolution is important, as it would confirm support for these projects.

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REPRESENTATIVE STUTES questioned why Ms. Clemans did not mention the [United States Armed Forces] during her testimony. She expressed the understanding that completing the projects would be a "huge boon" for the military.

MS. CLEMANS answered that ARRC has had outreach with the military, especially concerning the Northern Rail Extension project. She pointed out the [Tanana Bridge] on the extension already provides year-round access to the Joint Base Elmendorf-Richardson's (JBER's) training facility. She stated that the military had helped to fund the bridge.

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REPRESENTATIVE MCCABE added that the military has been to Port MacKenzie over 20 times in the past year to conduct meetings with the Alaska Railroad, and it will be using the area around the port for training.

REPRESENTATIVE STUTES, in a follow-up comment, suggested to "keep pushing" [the relationship with] the military forward.

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CO-CHAIR CARRICK, after ascertaining that there was no one else who wished to testify, closed public testimony on HJR 14.

[1:13:55 PM](#)

CO-CHAIR CARRICK announced that HJR 14 was held over.

[1:14:13 PM](#)

The committee took an at-ease from 1:14 p.m. to 1:15 p.m.

SJR 12-NOAA BUOY OUTAGES

[1:15:19 PM](#)

CO-CHAIR CARRICK announced that the final order of business would be CS FOR SENATE JOINT RESOLUTION NO. 12(TRA), Urging the United States Congress and the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration to address outages of National Data Buoy Center stations.

[1:15:31 PM](#)

SENATOR FORREST DUNBAR, Alaska State Legislature, as prime sponsor, presented the committee substitute (CS) for SJR 12(TRA). He paraphrased from the sponsor statement [copy included in the committee packet], which read as follows [original punctuation provided]:

SJR 12 calls attention to a small but important piece of federal infrastructure: National Data Buoy Center meteorological stations. Weather buoys provide important data points for forecasting models and real time observations that are critical to safe fishing and navigation in coastal Alaska. They inform mariners decisions on when to leave harbor and when to return.

Of particular concern is the Seal Rocks Buoy in Prince William Sound. The Coast Guard relies on this station to determine if conditions in Hinchinbrook Entrance are safe for the transit of laden oil tankers departing the Alyeska Terminal in Valdez. Like many other NDBC meteorological stations in Alaska, the Seal Rocks Buoy has experienced lengthy service outages in the last few years, including the entirety of last winter. Currently, it has been nonfunctional since October 2024. Without this station, the Coast Guard must rely on spot reports from passing ships and data from more distant stations to estimate conditions in Hinchinbrook Entrance.

This situation is dangerous. Hinchinbrook Entrance is narrow; if a tanker were to lose control there would be very little time to prevent it from grounding. Attaching a tow line or performing any other rescue operations is very difficult in high winds and waves. If a tanker did ground in bad weather, Prince William Sound would experience a repeat of the Exxon Valdez disaster. This would be devastating for the local environment, fisheries, and tourism. It would cost the state and federal government tens of billions of dollars to clean up. When the stakes are this high, it is essential that safety equipment like the Seal Rocks Buoy kept in service.

SJR 12 will convey this information to Alaska's Congressional delegation and the National Oceanographic and Atmospheric Administration, the parent agency of NDBC. It will ask NOAA to restore reliability to NDBC and Seal Rocks Buoy service and ask Congress to ensure NOAA has the resources to do so. At a time when federal agencies and services are under threat, it is important to remind decision-makers that these functions are critical to Alaska.

[1:18:40 PM](#)

JOHN GUTHRIE, Project Manager, Maritime Operations, Prince William Sound Regional Citizens' Advisory Council, gave invited testimony on CSSJR 12(TRA). He stated that the council is a federally mandated, nonprofit organization with the mission of promoting environmentally safe operations of the Alyeska pipeline, the Valdez Marine Terminal, and the associated oil tankers. The Oil Pollution Act of 1990 and its contract with

the Alyeska Pipeline Service Company guide this work. He stated that the council represents the communities affected by the [1989] Exxon Valdez oil spill, as well as other groups.

MR. GUTHRIE stated that the oil from the spill is still found on the beaches throughout the region. He acknowledged that certain species may never recover, and there is lingering trauma in people from the affected communities. He stated that the oil-spill prevention system in Prince William Sound is one of the most comprehensive in the country, as tugboats escort every outbound tanker from Valdez to the Gulf of Alaska.

MR. GUTHRIE, on behalf of the council, expressed support for the proposed resolution, which would request that the U.S. Congress and the National Data Buoy Center (NDBC), under the National Oceanographic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA), address the outages of these national data buoys and weather stations in the state. He argued that this is critical for the safe transportation of oil in the region. He added that the information from the stations has benefited subsistence gathering, commercial fishing, charter boats, tour boats, recreational boats, freight shippers, and other users.

MR. GUTHRIE stated that the main concern is Hinchinbrook Entrance, which connects the sound with the gulf. Over the last year and a half, he said that the buoy has been functional for only 35 days. Before tankers can leave the sound, he indicated that there is a requirement on wind speed and wave height, and the U.S. Coast Guard makes these decisions using buoy data. He maintained that if the buoys were not functioning, the information would not be exact, causing concern for accompanying tugboats in bad weather. He continued that the council would like the assurance that tankers would not depart in conditions when a tugboat could not operate. He emphasized that the operation of the Seal Rocks Buoy is imperative to oil spill prevention.

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REPRESENTATIVE MCCABE questioned who has the responsibility for the maintenance of buoys.

MR. GUTHRIE responded that NDBC and NOAA are responsible for the maintenance. He stated that logistical support from the U.S. Coast Guard can be requested, but this is not its primary job. He stated that NDBC is contracting a vessel in June to repair

the buoy. He acknowledged that the Coast Guard cannot always offer support.

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ROBERT ARCHIBALD, President, Prince William Sound Regional Citizens' Advisory Council, gave invited testimony on CSSJR 12(TRA). He shared that he has been on the board for 10 years. He expressed support for the proposed legislation. He pointed out that this would address buoys in the Gulf of Alaska and Prince William Sound. He explained that the Trans-Alaska Pipeline System (TAPS) does not stop in Valdez; rather, it continues out on tankers to the West Coast or Asia.

MR. ARCHIBALD shared that he has worked onboard escort tugboats out of Valdez for 15 years and onboard various vessels in Valdez for 22 years. From this experience, he said that he has firsthand knowledge of being on the ocean without reliable weather-observation information. He stressed that this puts tugboat crews in harm's way. He pointed out that buoy data is more reliable than the human eye and a wind forecast from vessels.

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CO-CHAIR EISCHEID, per the proposed resolution, questioned the meaning of the phrase "take actions necessary" to restore the buoy station. He further questioned what is not happening that the proposed resolution is requesting.

ARIELLE WIGGEN, Staff, Senator Forrest Dunbar, Alaska State Legislature, on behalf of Senator Dunbar, answered questions on CSSJR 12(TRA). She deferred the question to Mr. Guthrie.

MR. GUTHRIE explained that the current funding for buoy maintenance is insufficient.

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REPRESENTATIVE MCCABE commented that the proposed resolution could be strengthened by having the requirement that the U.S. Coast Guard maintain the buoy, as it has a cutter ship in Cordova. He suggested that this could be the U.S. Coast Guard's job, noting that a buoy tender is already set up for this work. He opined that this would not require a contract, and it could pertain only to this area, as another oil spill should be prevented.

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CO-CHAIR CARRICK questioned whether the idea was posed that the U.S. Coast Guard could take over the management of the Seal Rocks Buoy.

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ARIELLE WIGGEN responded that this question has not been asked. She stated that this change could be entertained. In response to a follow-up question concerning the number of buoys in the state that are not functioning, she stated that she would follow up to the committee with this answer.

CO-CHAIR CARRICK, in follow up, also requested information concerning the number of buoys that NOAA manages in the state and the number of these with outages.

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The committee took a brief at-ease at 1:29 p.m.

[1:29:43 PM](#)

CO-CHAIR CARRICK announced that CSSJR 12(TRA) was held over.

[1:30:39 PM](#)

ADJOURNMENT

There being no further business before the committee, the House Transportation Standing Committee meeting was adjourned at 1:30 p.m.