Stan Jones
Public Information Manager
Prince William Sound Regional Citizens' Advisory Council
907.273.6230
jones@pwsrcac.org

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Tower for iceberg-detecting radar system arrives in Prince William Sound

The efforts of a citizens' group to improve oil tanker safety in Prince William Sound took an important step forward Oct. 21 when the radar tower for a new high-tech iceberg detection system reached Valdez.
The radar project is the work of the Prince William Sound Regional Citizens' Advisory Council, founded after the 1989 Exxon Valdez oil spill to prevent similar incidents in the future.

Under the project, a radar station is being installed on Reef Island, which is just off Bligh Reef, site of the 1989 spill. The radar will scan west toward Columbia Bay to detect icebergs from Columbia Glacier that drift into the tanker lanes in Prince William Sound. This information will be transmitted to the Coast Guard and Alyeska Pipeline Service Co for warning tanker captains and other mariners when icebergs could pose a threat to shipping.

The 50-foot tower was hauled into Valdez at no cost to the citizens' council on the Alaska Tanker Company vessel Denali and offloaded at the city's container dock. After the tower is inspected in Valdez and determined to be complete and in good condition, it will be hauled to Reef Island by an Army Chinook helicopter, probably by early November.

The radar system will then be assembled on the island by soldiers from Fort Richardson and is expected to be ready for testing by early February of next year and in full operation by spring.

This innovative system relies on a conventional radar unit coupled to computers that analyze the incoming signals to filter out the sea-wave "clutter" that in the past has prevented effective detection of icebergs by radar.

As is often the case with the work of the citizens' council, the radar project is the product of cooperation by a number of stakeholders. Besides Alaska Tanker Company, the council's partners in the project include Alyeska's Ship Escort/Response Vessel System, the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, the Alaska Department of Environmental Conservation, Prince William Sound Community College, the Coast

Guard, and Cordova's Oil Spill Recovery Institute.

In addition, the tower's arrival in Valdez was made possible by donated labor from men from North Star Terminal and Stevedore Company. Tugs from Crowley Maritime kept the Denali in place while the tower was unloaded. Samson Tug and Barge helped out by suspending offloading operations at the container dock when the Denali came into port and standing off until the tower was unloaded.

The citizens' council is an independent, non-profit corporation formed to minimize the environmental impacts of the trans-Alaska pipeline terminal and tanker fleet.

The council has 18 member organizations, including communities affected by the Exxon Valdez oil spill and groups representing Alaska Native, aquaculture, environmental, commercial fishing, recreation and tourism interests in the spill region.

The council is certified under the federal Oil Pollution Act of 1990 as the citizens' advisory group for Prince William Sound, and operates under a contract with Alyeska Pipeline Service Co. The contract, which is in effect as long as oil flows through the pipeline, guarantees the council's independence, provides annual funding, and ensures the council the same access to terminal facilities as state and federal regulatory agencies.