



**Notes from the March 6, 2024
SERVS Contracted Vessel Fleet Representative Meeting**

Jeremy Robida / PWSRCAC staff

Contracted Vessel Program Background

Contracted vessels are essential in the Valdez Marine Terminal (VMT) and Prince William Sound (PWS) shippers contingency plans (c-plans), and a large spill response would be impossible without them. Contracted vessels (predominantly commercial fishing vessels) are anticipated to do everything from oil recovery to tasks such as crew transport, wildlife hazing, sensitive area protection, and other needs as simplistic as trash collection. The vessels are from six ports in the Exxon Valdez oil spill (EVOS) region: the PWS communities of Valdez, Cordova, and Whittier, as well as Seward, Homer, and Kodiak, which were also directly impacted by EVOS.

Vessels are pre-contracted and the associated crew goes through training on a yearly basis, making for a response system that is trained and ready should a spill response be needed. Contracts with these vessels are organized into “tiers”:

- Rapid Response vessels are expected to be off the docks within an hour and ready to meet larger open-water assets at the very start of the response.
- Tier I vessels are required to be available by hour 6.
- Tier II vessels are required to be available by hour 24, with approximately 40 Tier II vessels available by hour 18 for contingency planning assumptions.

Both the Rapid Response and Tier I vessel crews are fit tested for respirators as they would likely be engaged with fresher oil. All crews train to a 24-hour marine Hazwoper standard and have hands-on time with response equipment as part of annual training. In addition, these vessels and crews may be involved with other exercise activities or specialized trainings (such as working with oiled wildlife) over the course of the year.

In the PWS shippers c-plan scenario, which is more vessel-dependent, a total of 277 vessels (rapid response, Tier I, and Tier II) would theoretically be working and/or enroute to the response by hour 72 after a spill.

C-plans also include a Tier III training program that could be implemented to quickly onboard vessels and crews during an event. This would bring vessels and crews onto contract that are not part of the current system.

Each port has a contracted fleet representative that serves as liaison between Alyeska Pipeline Service Company's (Alyeska) Ship Escort Response Vessel System (SERVS) and those holding contracts. These representatives are chosen by other contract holders in their respective ports.

Meeting Background

Under the Oil Pollution Act of 1990 and the Prince William Sound Regional Citizens' Advisory Council's (PWSRCAC or Council) contract with Alyeska, PWSRCAC is tasked with monitoring response preparedness. Because contracted vessels are such a critical component of a response and relied upon so heavily, it has been valuable to meet with fleet representatives and dialogue with contract holders to get their perspectives on the

program. These PWSRCAC-led meetings have taken place in 2010, 2015, 2016, and 2017, and have always been held in person.

For FY2024, the PWSRCAC Board of Directors directed staff to host another fleet representative meeting. This meeting was held online via Zoom. This online meeting was deliberately shorter (two hours) in length than previous ones, which necessitated skipping the PWSRCAC presentations and topics of interest discussions. For example, in 2017, topics of interest included the upcoming transition from Crowley Maritime to Edison Chouest Offshore as Alyeska's maritime contractor, including the new SERVS tugs and oil spill response barges. Another topic discussed during the 2017 meeting was the search to identify and permit a spill simulants/surrogate project. Past, longer-format meetings have also had guest presentations by representatives from the Alaska Department of Environmental Conservation and U.S. Coast Guard.

PWSRCAC project manager Jeremy Robida also followed up with fleet representatives after the meeting via phone to capture any additional comments.

Meeting Objectives

The objective of this meeting was to engage with fleet representatives to: 1) discuss the overall health of the program, 2) gather feedback on exercise and training events, and 3) discuss port-specific concerns or issues. Robida primed participants to think about these questions with initial phone invitations and reminder emails ahead of the meeting. He also noted he would document this discussion and send relevant outcome information and recommendations to Alyeska/SERVS once finalized.

Thoughts and comments are organized by these three major questions and other themes that emerged during the meeting. Participant feedback was summarized where there was consensus, along with port-specific concerns.

Meeting participants had the opportunity to comment on the draft of this report.

Participants

A total of 12 fishing vessel captains participated, with at least one representative from each of the six ports where vessels are on contract (Kodiak, Homer, Seward, Whittier, Cordova, and Valdez). Four of these participants are also PWSRCAC volunteers. In addition, a total of seven Council staff members participated. Robida led and facilitated the meeting.

Introductions

Following introductions, representatives were asked to describe what sort of vessel they operated, their contract tier (Rapid Response, I, or II), and how long they have been part of the program. Most representatives have been involved with the SERVS program for a very long time, with the shortest timespan being roughly eight years. Approximately half had been responders during the EVOS disaster.

Question 1 / Overall Health of the Program

The general consensus was that the program was stable, vessels were interested in joining and holding a contract (some mentioned a wait list for their respective ports), that there was generally a high level of proficiency among the group, and that vessel and crew turnover was low.

There was also general consensus that the turnover happening (older participants retiring, vessels sinking, etc.) was occurring at a manageable rate.

Some more specific comments included:

- Several mentioned their Fishing Vessel Administrator (liaison between Alyeska/SERVS and contract holders, the individual who would dispatch a vessel for a response) as being proficient, and how they enjoyed working with them.
- Several noted that with lower fish prices last season, many wanted to hold onto their SERVS contracts or join the program.

Question 2 / Feedback on Exercise and Trainings

Online Hazwoper training versus in-person Hazwoper classes and in-person class time

The general consensus was that online Hazwoper classes were working “ok” and were “acceptable,” but representatives suggested some potential modifications and shared concerns. More specific comments included:

- Some preferred the online version as it allowed them the opportunity to do the class on their time versus having to be in class on a specific day. They also noted how they could quickly go through the modules if they had taken the class already, saving time, versus the in-person experience. Others felt that the in-person class was ultimately more valuable since it allowed for potential discussion and face time with other participants.
 - There was a suggestion to change the online modules and questions, and/or potentially add new material, so that long-term contract holders would be forced to look at the valuable training information with fresh eyes. One representative noted hearing about a “record time” of approximately 25 minutes to do the quiz and complete the 8-hour online course. Switching up material and questions would force more engagement.
 - Some cited that they knew this material well and were used to seeing it through the years, but that it might be a lot to absorb for a new program member. They suggested a separate online module for new program participants to better educate them on the SERVS prevention and response system, oil spill basics, fate and effects of oil on water, etc.
 - It was suggested and supported by several that perhaps there should be a rotating schedule, with the online Hazwoper course used for a set number of years, followed by an in-person class every so often. For example, there

could be three years (or other timeframe) of online Hazwoper, and then on the fourth year, an in-person Hazwoper class would take place.

- Several noted how they really enjoyed the in-person medical classes and how these had been valuable.
- Another suggested that adding value to the class via a more intensive Hazwoper certification process that went beyond the 8-hour marine Hazwoper might open up employment opportunities for participants beyond the SERVS program. The individual also commented how responders from Alaska that went to the Gulf of Mexico with the Deepwater Horizon incident were highly skilled and valuable, due to the SERVS training program.

Hands-on time with equipment

There was a consensus that when hands-on stations were eliminated for safety reasons during the COVID-19 pandemic, skills and equipment familiarity suffered. All were happy to get back to the “usual” routine that included working more intensely with equipment on dry land.

Other more specific comments included:

- There was a recognition that long-time program participants were generally (more) proficient with equipment, but representatives cited how it was very important for new contract holders and new crew to see and get familiar with this equipment before they are out on the water with it. They felt this time with equipment on dry land was very important.
- Several mentioned that incoming participants needed more instruction and perhaps a different format (as noted with Hazwoper above) if they were in their first training with the program. There was agreement that the captain of the vessel had a duty to push new crew to get hands-on training; for example, to start the power pack or be the person getting dressed out in Tyvek during the PPE demonstration.

On-water exercise / training

There was a general unanimous request for more exercise and training opportunities. As with the above comments related to hands-on training with equipment, representatives stressed how this was more important for new crew and vessels. There was also an acknowledgement that there were different tiers of vessels, specialized training like wildlife response that rotated between geographic locations, and how Valdez-based boats would likely have *more* exercise activity due to their close proximity to the SERVS assets homeported in Valdez and VMT c-plan exercise activity, for example, versus a vessel from outside of Port Valdez. Other comments included:

- Several representatives voiced that they wanted more scenario-driven exercises and trainings, and a better storyline to guide their activity. They said it is tough to

just go run circles with gear, especially when currents or winds contradicted expected actions.

- Several noted how they wanted to be more involved in the exercise planning process to give input on vessel tasking, scenarios, etc.
- There was an ask to provide visuals like simulated trajectories and organizational charts to all involved, so that people could see and know who were in the other task forces.
- Several voiced that working with different GRS, aside from the geographically close ones (most of which have already been deployed many times), would be beneficial.
- Perhaps it is just a matter of keeping better training records of who's done what in the past several years, but representatives requested that SERVS work to rotate tactical duties and equipment during trainings so the same crews have receive a variety of training opportunities.
- Weather days and the substitute radio drills could be more valuable by planning training activities in the event of bad weather. There is not much utility in simulating equipment being offloaded. (Council project manager Roy Robertson explained that SERVS is working on some sort of radio drill kit/improvements.)
- Representatives noted how they liked the longer duration exercises, and how longer events could be arranged in advance so people could plan for those dates accordingly.
- During a follow-up phone call, one representative noted that while the fleet gets paid for doing the deployments, their request for more exercises was more than a request for money; it was about being proficient and ready in case an actual response was needed.

Question 3 / Port-Specific Concerns

With the short meeting time, group discussion on this topic was limited. Due to time constraints, Robida didn't devote much time to this question, and noted he would follow up with representatives after the meeting to talk through this question more. Follow-up comments included:

- The *Ross Chouest* was holding station via Dynamic Positioning (DP) in Seward during training last year. But when the sea breeze shifted in the afternoon, the *Ross* never adjusted and flipped around 180 degrees with the wind. This made it difficult to bring equipment back, as vessels were towing boom with the wind and boom was bunched up behind them. The prop wash from the *Ross Chouest* also made it difficult and smaller vessels were being pushed around. The suggestion was to anchor the *Ross Chouest* and let it naturally swing with tides and winds.
- The Whittier representative noted how it was difficult to fill up vessels with fresh water in the winter, given the difficulty of accessing a freshwater hose. They said

- vessels would likely be better off bringing water aboard via containers and bottles, but that this was not practical for a long duration event.
- A Cordova representative suggested that respirator fit testing could be expanded to additional days. They also suggested that it might be best for Cordova District Fishermen United (CDFU) to run the fit testing program, rather than relying on the Cordova Fire Department. It was their impression that fit testing was only conducted on a single day, and this was limiting potential Tier I vessel crews. However, in some follow-up with SERVS, it seems this fit testing option is available more frequently than a single day.

Other Discussion

Other topics arose during the meeting, outside the three main discussion questions. There was enough conversation on these topics to capture them in this report.

Crewing for training and exercises versus an actual incident

There was consensus that finding and retaining crew for the annual training and exercises was not a problem. Fleet representatives noted that many of the crew had been involved with the program and participating with the same vessels for a long time. But they expressed concern about how a real event would be different and questioned if crews would have the ability to stay on for a long duration event.

There was also discussion about how the world has changed since 1989, and representatives questioned if people would quit their jobs and drop everything to respond, as seen in the aftermath of EVOS.

A Valdez representative who had been involved with a longer-duration VMT incident years prior said crewing was difficult for an extended time, but they made it work. They noted how they drew from a crew pool and did crew exchanges. They also cited how resupply logistics were more of a concern, and pointed out that these logistics and crew exchanges would be that much more challenging to manage in a more remote event. One representative who worked during EVOS stated that his specific job was solely to transport crew and work those logistical issues during the EVOS response.

Competition with other job opportunities / day-to-day jobs / crew pay

Representatives noted that annual training and exercises had generally known dates to plan around and involved a small portion of one's overall yearly schedule and income. Finding crew for these dates was not a problem. It was the longer-duration events that were the concern and more of an unknown.

Several representatives reported how they had to increase their pay to keep qualified secondary captains interested and available should they want to take vacation themselves. With big harbor projects in Cordova, for example, there was competition for a person's time and expected wages.

Crew pay was reported to be a potential concern. Representatives noted that there was simply too much competition for work as of late and it might not be worth somebody's time to take vacation/leave from their real job to attend training if pay wasn't adequate. They suggested SERVS continue to pay attention to this. Here again was a nod to the online Hazwoper as being more accommodating. No dollar amounts were discussed, and PWSRCAC staff reminded the attendees that the Council's interest was in the health of the overall response system and not contract specifics or pay issues.

Crew living elsewhere

There was an acknowledgement that both captains and crew leave town for periods of time in the winter months especially, or even perhaps live the bulk of the year elsewhere. However, there was also an understanding that additional vessels were on contract to serve as a buffer for this reason. Representatives stressed the value of a crew pool and how it would likely be used should there be an incident.

Robida noted how the system is built to be turnkey and quickly get a response moving. He acknowledged that there likely would be crew exchanges needed, but that the basic system was in place to accomplish this and train others quickly.

Captains voiced how they didn't want just anybody on their boat for the sake of a warm body, especially working as alternate captains. The individuals needed to be skilled and trustworthy.

Communications (CB functionality, VHF vs CB vs FRS band, etc.)

This topic was not discussed due to time, but one representative did note they needed more time and training on the Weavix radios if the expectation was to use them. They had used them at training last year, but felt they needed more explanation to feel comfortable with them.

Requests for Future Meetings

There were several participants who noted they would have preferred to have this meeting in person. In meeting follow-up, some cited how the Zoom meeting was just fine and easy to attend. PWSRCAC staff and the Council's Oil Spill Prevention and Response (OSPR) Committee members will need to discuss the merits of in-person (or hybrid option with Zoom tie-in) versus a strictly online meeting for future budget cycles.

PWSRCAC Shared Information

PWSRCAC staff briefly discussed several topics of interest to the fleet. 1) Potential changes to the applicability of the Coast Guard's Subchapter M towing vessel regulations that both SERVS and PWSRCAC were tracking, and 2) how the VMT and PWS shippers plans had undergone recent public review and were in the renewal process under new ADEC

regulations. Staff noted how the number of large-scale exercises changed from requiring *up to* two a year, to now a *minimum* of one every five years.

PWSRCAC Comments and Recommendations

This meeting, though short, was of high value to PWSRCAC. This structured discussion provided some sense of the attitude and mindset of program participants. It was reassuring to check in with fleet representatives who indicated the program is stable overall, and there are no major issues of concern.

It is also beneficial for Council staff and others who were not here for EVOS to see the passion and dedication of those involved in this program. Many under contract have been involved for a long time and sincerely care about making the program the best it can be. They recognize the unique system that we have in PWS, as a result of EVOS. Conversations like these serve as an important mechanism to gather information needed to continuously improve the SERVS response system and motivates PWSRCAC staff to continue to devote time and resources to these meetings in the future. PWSRCAC staff greatly appreciates the fleet representative time and input shared during this meeting, not just on a professional and organizational level, but also on a personal level. Council staff would like to thank all of the representatives that participated.

Specific PWSRCAC Recommendations Stemming from this Meeting Include:

- Better test the Tier III program through exercise, specifically crewing and the onboarding of response workers in light of representatives' concerns about crewing for a long-term response. This is something that could be tested in a large tabletop exercise. For example, a group of people who have never done the SERVS training could be identified (not simulated) and actually run through the 8-hour marine Hazwoper training, their feedback gathered, and the (simulated) logistics of moving them to the field and specific vessels played out via tabletop. Class feedback could be used to shape and further refine the online Hazwoper course.
- Alter the materials/questions in the 8-hour marine Hazwoper course on a yearly basis. This is ultimately valuable material aimed at keeping responders safe in the field and people should be challenged to think about it a bit more as they take the course.
- SERVS should consider the idea of rotating online versus in-person Hazwoper classes. There will likely never be a way to satisfy everyone on this front, but there are different learning styles, and having the classes in person does give time and a physical place for discussion that likely will not occur with only online classes.
- The comment about the *Ross Chouest* using DP to hold station seems simple enough to address. Equipment recovery is a large element of time spent in any deployment and, just like the practice of recovery operations, needs to be done safely. Positioning the *Ross Chouest* via anchor, or repositioning with DP to account for the shifting wind, seems simple enough and should be discussed. Robida already had

some follow-up with SERVS on this comment, knowing that annual spring training was about to start.

- Representatives asked for more deployment opportunities. While PWSRCAC supports that request, we recognize that more may not always be possible. With that said, what deployment and training time does occur should be maximized. There were two recent open-water exercises (09.29.2023 Naked Island and 02.17.2024 Orca Bay No-Notice) where a total of four vessels were called out with each deployment, but only two vessels had the chance to tow boom. These seem like missed opportunities, both for SERVS and for the participating vessels.