E. HARBORS OF SAFE REFUGE

Leaking or disabled vessels may require a sheltered location with adequate water depth to lighter or repair the vessel. Leaking vessels need to be repaired to limit the amount of spilled product. If leaking vessels aren't repaired, a spilled product, such as oil, can negatively affect downstream environmental resources and shoreline. Vessels need to be anchored or moored in protected waters to safely make repairs and stop the loss of oil or other hazardous products. In acknowledgement of this need, the Cook Inlet Subarea Committee identified potential safe anchoring or mooring locations in the Cook Inlet area.

Cook Inlet has some of the most environmentally sensitive coastal areas in Alaska. In addition to sensitive shoreline habitats such as marshes, sheltered tidal flats, and exposed tidal flats, Cook Inlet supports a number of sensitive biological resources including birds, fish and shellfish, and marine mammals. The inlet area contains national parks, state critical habitat areas, and state parks, and is managed for a variety of uses including oil exploration and commercial /sport fishing.

Cook Inlet is widely used for marine commerce. Log transport ships, fuel barges, freighters, oil industry work boats, and cruise ships make routine stops at Cook Inlet ports. Also, commercial fishing boats, sport fishing charter boats, and privately-owned vessels regularly use local harbors and docks.

Anchoring or mooring large vessels generally requires water greater than 10 fathoms. In addition, labor and necessary equipment must be available to make repairs or to lighter product. Few suitable emergency mooring locations exist in Cook Inlet due to extensive mudflats, limited onshore infrastructure, and large tidal ranges. The Port of Anchorage in upper Cook Inlet, Nikiski in middle Cook Inlet, and Kachemak Bay and the Port of Homer in lower Cook Inlet offer the safest locations with the largest onshore support facilities.

Yet each of the above areas have extensive sensitive environmental areas nearby or even adjacent to repair locations. In particular, Kachemak Bay is a National Estuarine Research Reserve and a state-designated critical habitat area. Decision-makers must address both environmental and operational issues when deciding where to take stricken vessels.

There is not one perfect mooring or anchoring site for all vessels and all situations. Larger vessels, such as oil tankers and freighters, cannot be taken to all sites listed below. Some sites have shallow approaches or small-sized bays, and large ships cannot enter these locations. But smaller vessels, such as fishing vessels and charter vessels, may be able to utilize all potential sites.

Potential anchoring or mooring sites were reviewed by state and federal agencies, the Southwest Pilots Association, Cook Inlet crude oil industries, the Kenai Peninsula Borough, the Seldovia Oil Spill Team, CISPRI, Prince William Sound RCAC, and Cook Inlet RCAC. In the event a vessel needs assistance, officials may refer to the list below of pre-identified sites to aid them in responding to the incident.

The U. S. Coast Guard Captain of the Port (COTP) – Anchorage Marine Safety Office has jurisdiction over approving temporary mooring or anchoring locations for leaking or damaged vessels within this area. The COTP will confer with state and local officials when deciding where and when to move a stricken vessel.

The Cook Inlet Subarea Committee identified the following sites as possible locations to anchor or moor a damaged vessel:

Anchorage
Drift River
Kachemak Bay
Koyuktolik (Dog Fish Bay)
Nikiski
Port Graham
Port Chatham
Seldovia
Seward
Whittier

Each vessel incident presents unique circumstances that the unified command must address. The goal is to safely repair or salvage a damaged vessel while avoiding or minimizing impacts to local resources. Prior to bringing a vessel into an anchoring or mooring location, the Unified Command will need to consider:

Status of the vessel
Public safety
Environmental resources at risk
Strategies to protect sensitive areas
Prevailing winds
Navigational approach to the mooring site
Anchoring ground
Vessel traffic
Available dock and support facilities
Available skilled and spill response labor