



Western Alaska Oil Spill Planning Criteria

Report to Congress
July 15, 2025



U.S. Coast Guard

Foreword

July 15, 2025

I am pleased to present the following report, “Western Alaska Oil Spill Planning Criteria,” prepared by the U.S. Coast Guard.

The Don Young Coast Guard Authorization Act of 2022 directs the submission of a report describing the status of implementation of paragraph (9) of section 311(j) of the Federal Water Pollution Control Act (33 U.S.C. 1321(j)).

Pursuant to Congressional requirements, this report is provided to the following members of Congress:

The Honorable Ted Cruz
Chairman, Senate Committee on Commerce, Science, and Transportation

The Honorable Maria Cantwell
Ranking Member, Senate Committee on Commerce, Science, and Transportation

The Honorable Sam Graves
Chairman, House Committee on Transportation and Infrastructure

The Honorable Rick Larsen
Ranking Member, House Committee on Transportation and Infrastructure

Please direct report inquiries to my Senate Liaison Office at (202) 224-2913 or House Liaison Office at (202) 225-4775.

Sincerely,



Kevin E. Lunday
Admiral, U.S. Coast Guard
Acting Commandant





Western Alaska Oil Spill Planning Criteria

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I. Legislative Language

This report responds to the language set forth in Section 11309(b)(2)(C) of the Don Young Coast Guard Authorization Act of 2022 (Pub. L. No. 117-263), which reads:

SEC. 11309. WESTERN ALASKA OIL SPILL PLANNING CRITERIA.

(b) WESTERN ALASKA OIL SPILL PLANNING CRITERIA.—

(2) ESTABLISHMENT OF WESTERN ALASKA OIL SPILL PLANNING CRITERIA.—

(A) DEADLINE.—Not later than 2 years after the date of enactment of this Act, the President shall establish the Western Alaska oil spill planning criteria required to be established under paragraph (9)(D)(i) of section 311(j) of the Federal Water Pollution Control Act (33 U.S.C. 1321(j)).

(B) CONSULTATION.—In establishing the Western Alaska oil spill planning criteria described in subparagraph (A), the President shall consult with the Federal agencies, State and local governments, Tribes (as defined in section 323 of title 14, United States Code), the owners and operators that would be subject to such planning criteria, oil spill removal organizations, Alaska Native organizations, and environmental nongovernmental organizations.

(C) CONGRESSIONAL REPORT.—Not later than 2 years after the date of enactment of this Act, the Secretary shall submit to Congress a report describing the status of implementation of paragraph (9) of section 311(j) of the Federal Water Pollution Control Act (33 U.S.C. 1321(j)) .

II. Report

The Western Alaska Oil Spill Planning Criteria will establish requirements for Vessel Response Plans for vessels operating in areas within Western Alaska, where National Planning Criteria are determined inappropriate.

Western Alaska Oil Spill Planning Criteria Development

The Coast Guard is developing Western Alaska Oil Spill Planning Criteria by leveraging the Marine Environmental Response Criteria Action Team and work previously conducted by the Marine Oil Spill Response Plan Advisory Group. The Marine Environmental Response Criteria Action Team is comprised of subject matter experts from Coast Guard Headquarters, Pacific Area, District Seventeen, Sector Western Alaska and U.S. Arctic, and Marine Safety Unit Valdez.

The Marine Environmental Response Criteria Action Team adjudicates all input received from outreach efforts using this information to craft comprehensive requirements to improve readiness and mitigate risk. The intent is to complete a project proposal based on input received from a public Request for Information to support Western Alaska Oil Spill Planning Criteria development and implementation.

Outreach and Consultation

The Coast Guard developed a comprehensive engagement plan and actively conducts outreach efforts, including delivering presentations and participating in panels at meetings for the Arctic and Western Alaska and Prince William Sound Area Committees. The Coast Guard also cooperates with bodies like the Alaska Regional Response Team, the Alaska Forum on the Environment, and the Alaska Tribal Conference on Environmental Management. Additionally, the Coast Guard held individual meetings with Tribes, industry representatives, and other stakeholder groups.

In December 2023, the Coast Guard issued a Request for Information to gather opinions, ideas, recommendations, and concerns related to establishment of Western Alaska Oil Spill Planning Criteria. The Request for Information contained background information and 28 specific questions to gather crucial information from stakeholder groups resulting in 28 comments from diverse stakeholders and Tribal organizations. Subsequently, the Coast Guard conducted a weeklong internal workshop to review all Request for Information comments and is currently evaluating recommendations for incorporation into planning criteria. Several comments highlighted the need for a comprehensive risk assessment to determine mitigation measures, resource requirements, and the potential to establish sub-regions. The Coast Guard is actively working to develop methodology for this risk assessment, which is expected to set the standard for oil spill risk assessments nationwide.

The Coast Guard formally designated the Assistant Commandant for Response Policy as the Tribal Consultation Official for Western Alaska Oil Spill Planning Criteria and in March 2024, a notification of designation was sent to all federally recognized Tribes in Alaska, inviting them to partake in consultations. In January 2025, an updated memo was sent to all federally recognized

Tribes in Alaska announcing a new Tribal Consultation Official due to transfer of the previous officer serving as the Assistant Commandant for Response Policy. There was extensive outreach to individual tribes, and each of these activities requires coordination and potential follow-up actions.

In December 2024, the Coast Guard led a criteria development workshop with members of the Marine Environmental Response Criteria Action Team, and Coast Guard regulatory and legal staffs. The workshop highlighted the complexity of establishing criteria specific to this region and identified categories of focus, to include a need for comprehensive risk assessment.

On January 7, 2025, the Coast Guard published a general solicitation for comments via the Coast Guard's online message board inviting feedback on a series of open-ended questions. The questions provide the public an opportunity to provide general comments on approaches to implementing the mandate. The Coast Guard announced the posting of these questions in various stakeholder forums, including the Western Alaska Area Committee and during an industry-led Western Alaska Oil Spill Planning Criteria workshop. No comments were received to date. Any submitted comments will be made available for public viewing.

Next Steps

The Coast Guard continues to develop the Western Alaska Oil Spill Planning Criteria, with next steps focused on criteria development specific to conducting a comprehensive risk assessment, continuing and completing consultation requirements, and evaluating areas of application for Western Alaska Oil Spill Planning Criteria. These actions are critical to ensuring the project remains aligned with both regulatory requirements and legislative objectives. The Service will prioritize collaboration, maintain open lines of communication with stakeholders, and ensure documentation and assessments are completed. These actions are interdependent and are addressed concurrently in an effort keep the process moving forward and to benefit from the outputs of each line of effort.

Risk Assessment. The Coast Guard is developing a methodology for conducting a comprehensive risk assessment. This assessment is a key component in determining if sub-regions are necessary for the criteria and will help ensure the process considers all relevant risks and factors. Once a contract is awarded, risk assessment is anticipated to take between 18-24 months.

Evaluating Areas of Application for Western Alaska Oil Spill Planning Criteria. The Coast Guard will assess National Planning Criteria in remote areas of Alaska by conducting comprehensive evaluations of existing infrastructure, environmental challenges, and response capabilities. This involves gathering data on response times, transportation logistics, and local hazards such as severe weather conditions and geographic isolation. The assessment will analyze how criteria may enhance response capabilities for critical industries, such as oil and gas, while ensuring safe maritime access for economic and energy transport needs, and promoting national and maritime security and energy independence. The Coast Guard will collaborate with local agencies, stakeholders, and experts to ensure the criteria are adaptable to the unique needs of these regions, ensuring effective and efficient maritime safety and emergency response.

Additional Actions

In addition to progress in these areas, the Coast Guard identified areas for improvement in existing regulation and policy with positive impacts for response planning in Western Alaska. For example, the Coast Guard is developing guidance and training for proper and timely Vessel Response Plans activation when a spill or substantial threat of a spill occurs. This effort is directed toward Coast Guard Federal On-Scene Coordinators, Qualified Individuals, and vessel owners and operators. The Coast Guard also promulgated guidance to ensure Federal On-Scene Coordinators understand their authority to authorize deviations from using resources identified in a Vessel Response Plans when doing so results in a more effective response.

III. Conclusion

The Western Alaska Oil Spill Planning Criteria will ensure appropriate measures are in place to reduce oil spill risks and minimize the impact should one occur where response capability cannot meet national standards in a strategic and economically important region. The creation and implementation of Western Alaska Oil Spill Planning Criteria is important to our national security and economic stability and is approached with all seriousness and care to ensure adherence to statutory authority and achieve maximum public benefit.