



Search and Rescue in Arctic Coastal Communities

Report to Congress
September 3, 2025



U.S. Coast Guard

Foreword

September 3, 2025

I am pleased to present the following report, “Search and Rescue in Arctic Coastal Communities”, prepared by the U.S. Coast Guard.

The Elijah E. Cummings Coast Guard Authorization Act of 2020 directs the submission of a report on the search and rescue capabilities of the Coast Guard in Arctic coastal communities.

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





Search and Rescue in Arctic Coastal Communities

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I. Legislative Language

This report responds to the language set forth in Section 8425 of the Elijah E. Cummings Coast Guard Authorization Act of 2020 (Pub. L. No. 116-283), which reads:

SEC. 8425. REPORT ON ARCTIC SEARCH AND RESCUE.

(a) IN GENERAL.—Not later than 180 days after the date of the enactment of this Act, the Commandant shall submit to the Committee on Commerce, Science, and Transportation of the Senate and the Committee on Transportation and Infrastructure of the House of Representatives a report on the search and rescue capabilities of the Coast Guard in Arctic coastal communities.

(b) CONTENTS.—The report under subsection (a) shall include the following:

- (1) An identification of ways in which the Coast Guard can more effectively partner with Arctic coastal communities to respond to search and rescue incidents through training, funding, and deployment of assets.
- (2) An analysis of the costs of forward deploying on a seasonal basis Coast Guard assets in support of such communities for responses to such incidents.

II. Report

The Coast Guard executes its missions in the U.S. Arctic, including search and rescue through operational presence of assets, facilities, and people, as well as strong partnerships in the arctic. The Coast Guard's close partnerships with coastal communities, including search and rescue training and exercises, increase the Service's ability to execute search and rescue.

The Coast Guard also maintains major cutter coverage in the Bering Sea and employs a mobile, seasonal, scalable approach for deployment of additional air and surface assets in proportion to the level of maritime activity and national security needs. Investment in and recapitalization of Coast Guard icebreakers, aircraft, and enabling systems will ensure the capability to provide critical presence and mission execution in the Arctic.

Arctic Coastal Community Partnerships

For more than a century, the Coast Guard has played an integral in maintaining the safety of mariners in the Arctic. While the Service leverages its strong relationships across the region to meet search and rescue needs, the immensity of the area and lack of additional search and rescue providers makes doing so a challenging endeavor.

With the exception of North Slope Borough Search and Rescue, which serves the Utqiagvik (Barrow) area, search and rescue capabilities of remote Arctic communities are extremely limited. Alaskan Native communities, Borough, and volunteer search and rescue organizations are primarily focused on land-based search and rescue. These communities have limited lodging and are not connected to the Alaska road system. Any Mass Rescue Operation would quickly overwhelm any of Alaska's Arctic coastal communities, the local Alaskan Native populations, and significantly stress the entire Arctic search and rescue system.

The Coast Guard has implemented an array of prevention-based activities and outreach programs in the Arctic, including Mass Rescue Operation exercises and direct engagement with arctic cruise ship and expedition operators. This includes conduct of regular training exercises with the Northwest Arctic Borough and North Slope Borough search and rescue organizations. The Service also carries out boating safety training and vessel examinations. Additionally, Coast Guard personnel conduct an annual average of five examinations of foreign Polar Code classed ships. The Coast Guard is partnering with the Alaska Eskimo Whaling Commission and conducting extensive outreach to local Alaskan Native communities during the ongoing Arctic Coast Port Access Route Study. When completed, Arctic Coast Port Access Route Study established traffic patterns will reduce the search and rescue threat from interactions between waterway users.

Since 2016, the Coast Guard, through focuses such as the Arctic Coast Guard Forum and the Arctic Council Emergency Prevention, Preparedness and Response Working Group, collaborated with the Association of Arctic Expedition Cruise Operators to develop and conduct annual Mass Rescue Operation exercise involving Arctic Nations and vessel owners/operators. These exercises are attended by more than 100 representatives from all Arctic nations, operators, and members of academia. This collaboration led to increased understanding and coordination between cruise ship operators and federal agencies, including the development of on shore shelters and enhancements to communications equipment and personal protective equipment.

Coast Guard efforts also involve communication with the Russian government to ensure a safe Arctic. Joint Rescue Coordination Center Juneau conducts regular search and rescue communication exercises with Maritime Rescue Coordination Center Vladivostok, in the Russian Federation, to ensure open communications and interoperability for search and rescue responses. Additionally, District Seventeen has conducted joint Coast Guard cutter and Russian Border Guard patrols along the maritime boundary line for search and rescue readiness and other missions.

Seasonal Coast Guard Assets Deployments

The Coast Guard is committed to providing search and rescue support across the Arctic but no permanent presence north of the Bering Strait and no plans to establish a permanent presence there. The Coast Guard maintains a single year-round major cutter presence in the Bering Sea. Deployed vessels are responsible for patrolling the area from Dutch Harbor to the Bering Strait, a 715 nautical mile transit (equivalent to the distance from Jacksonville, Florida, to New York City, New York). In addition to providing critical search and rescue capability in the region, these deployments support execution of other Coast Guard missions (e.g., living marine resources, commercial fishing vessel safety, and marine environmental protection, etc.). Coast Guard Cutter *Healy*, whose primary science mission keeps the vessel mainly outside of effective search and rescue response range, is the only Coast Guard surface asset that routinely operates north of the Bering Strait.

Since 2016, the Coast Guard maintains a seasonal presence in Kotzebue, Alaska, just north of the Seward Peninsula, with two MH-60T aircraft as part of the annual Operation Arctic Shield. These deployments run from July 1st through October 31st and prosecute search and rescue, maritime domain awareness, living marine resources, marine environmental protection, and training missions.

The direct costs of Arctic Shield 2024 totaled approximately \$686 thousand, including \$255 thousand for the hangar lease, \$220 thousand for the lodging contract, and \$211 thousand for temporary duty travel. Those costs are above the base Operations and Sustainment funding for aircraft operations, maintenance, and personnel. The availability of the National Guard hangar, which can house two MH-60Ts, and negotiated contract lodging in Kotzebue, is an exception among Arctic communities, and makes forward deployment possible. Long-term deployment of MH-60Ts to any other Arctic location is not feasible due to lack of infrastructure.

III. Conclusion

The United States is an Arctic nation with both sovereign rights and responsibilities to safeguard our interests in the Arctic. The Coast Guard continues to work with coastal communities in the Arctic to enhance search and rescue response capabilities through increased presence, prevention activities, trainings, exercises, and other reoccurring engagements.