



# Guidance for Vessel Storm Avoidance in the Aleutian Islands

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## Introduction

Prudent storm avoidance is critical in this unique region, because of the lack of resources, time and distance to deliver resources, extreme environmental conditions, and navigational hazards. Storm avoidance is the first line of defense in preventing a vessel from becoming in extremis. Storm Avoidance alone does not constitute or justify Force Majeure. Vessels should assume and plan for the extreme weather in the region.

**The Aleutian Islands region is uniquely challenging and, at times, may offer limited options for seeking shelter due to:**

**Lack of Resources:** The region lacks virtually all the towing and other services upon which mariners typically rely in extreme weather events or in response to equipment casualties.

**Time and Distance:** The timeline to deploy limited resources to remote areas of the Aleutian and Pribilof Islands is uncertain and can be a matter of several days.

**Extreme Conditions:** The weather is dynamic and violent.

**Navigational Hazards:** The bottom type and depths also restrict the availability of proper anchorages. Adequate Ports of Refuge vary greatly depending on the type of vessel, ground tackle and purpose for seeking refuge.

Masters are ultimately responsible for the safe operation and navigation of their vessels. It is further advised that **neither government nor commercial entities in Alaska will direct a vessel to any place of refuge, nor grant/deny permission for a vessel to seek shelter.** Those navigational decisions, and their environmental outcomes and legal implications rest solely with the master and vessel owners.

Masters compelled to deviate from their storm avoidance plan due to material casualty, or changing navigational circumstances, should consider the following options:

1. Execute an alternate route (in consultation with the weather routing service provider) to avoid significant weather. Early action is critical during severe weather events.
2. Proceed to Dutch Harbor – the only site in the region where Tugs, Pilots, and limited industrial services are consistently available.
3. Proceeding farther to sea to avoid developing weather systems.

The following provides some further best practices and planning considerations to assist masters in preparing for voyages through the region.



## 1. Pre-Voyage Planning

### 1.1 Weather Forecasting

- Obtain up-to-date and reliable weather forecasts specific to the Aleutian Islands.
- Use multiple sources for weather information, including the National Weather Service (NWS) and commercial weather service providers.
- If on scene weather is different than forecasted, provide updated observations to the National Weather Service Office in Anchorage by calling the office directly at 907-266-5127, sending an email to [anchorage.weather@noaa.gov](mailto:anchorage.weather@noaa.gov), or entering the observation manually at <https://inws.ncep.noaa.gov/report/>

### 1.2 Route Planning

Integrate alternate routes North and South of the Aleutian Chain and utilize approved passes between the ATBAs. The ATBA's are extremely important to avoid, as vessel operators who deviate from their routes are likely to enter environmentally sensitive areas unique to the Aleutian Islands, such as protected sea lion rookery sites, walrus haul out areas, northern fur seal rookeries, and critical habitat for the northern right whale.

- Ensure weather routing service providers have a copy of these advisory measures.
- For vessels not otherwise planning on calling in Alaska, identify the owner's preferred vessel agent should their services become necessary.
- Have planned contingencies and predefined criteria for altering course or seeking shelter.

## 2. Storm Avoidance Procedures/Best Practices

### 2.1 Decision Making

- Consider ballasting if needed for better ship handling in rough seas and to decrease the effects of strong winds. A lack of ballast causes the inability to maintain steerage, which could result in emergency situations.
- Be aware of communication capabilities and gaps in the area you plan to operate. VHF comms are extremely limited throughout the Aleutian Chain.
- Increase machinery readiness status when encountering heavy weather.
- When situations do deteriorate, early and clear communications are critical.



## 2.2 Shelter and Avoidance

- Unless the vessel can seek assistance or shelter at the Port of Dutch Harbor, the Master should take into consideration that **Pilots, Assist Tugs, Repair Services or Emergency Response Services** may not be otherwise available along the Aleutian Islands.
- The Aleutian Islands are notorious for inconsistent sheltering. The weather is constantly changing, with violent storms and local funneling and weather bursts throughout the island chain. The extreme terrain and difficulty of identifying adequate anchorages due to deep channels, rocky bottoms, and scarce bathymetric data adds risk. Extreme and frequent weather changes may result in a perceived safe anchoring or sheltering location, quickly deteriorating into a worse situation for vessels and crew.
- Maintain a safe distance from shorelines and shallow waters to avoid grounding potential. If planning to shelter within 3 nautical miles of the coast, vessels must comply with Alaska state pilotage laws. Pilot availability and feasibility to embark a pilot must be considered for vessels wishing to shelter in State waters. If no pilot is available, the U.S. Coast Guard will not approve or deny the request of a vessel to travel within State waters.
- Navigating and seakeeping on the leeward side of the islands is often the best way to ensure a vessel will drift seaward and away from the rocky shoreline. Station keeping or slow steaming at sea may be the safest option for riding out a storm.

## 3. Pilotage

- State requirements for pilotage, except for certain exempted vessels, are compulsory for all vessels navigating the waters of the State of Alaska. Generally, the boundaries of the compulsory pilotage waters of Alaska are within three (3) nautical miles of the state's coastline.
- Availability of an Alaska Marine Pilot (AMP) for the Aleutian Islands Region is limited to specific ports and primarily is at the Port of Dutch Harbor where pilots are dispatched 24/7 365 days a year.
- Ensure clear and timely communication with the AMP to request availability and feasibility of embarkation.



## 4. Communication and Reporting

- Notify relevant authorities, such as the U.S. Coast Guard, of any distress or potentially extremis situations. Early notification is of paramount importance. The Marine Exchange of Alaska’s 24 Hour Maritime Operation Center, APC providers & local agents are available to assist with these communications.
- For vessels not on innocent passage, communicate with your APC provider and Agent early if you are unable to comply with best practices/plan requirements or if your plans have changed.

## 5. Post-Storm Assessment/Lessons Learned

- Review the effectiveness of storm avoidance procedures and make necessary adjustments.
- Provide recommendations and input to the Aleutian Islands Waterways Safety Committee or other official entities in the region.

## 6. Resources

### 6.1 References

<b>U.S. Coast Pilot</b>	<a href="https://www.nauticalcharts.noaa.gov/publications/coast-pilot/xml2html.html?book=9">https://www.nauticalcharts.noaa.gov/publications/coast-pilot/xml2html.html?book=9</a>
<b>Aleutian Islands Waterways Safety Plan</b>	<a href="https://www.aleutianislandswsc.org/waterways-safety-plan">https://www.aleutianislandswsc.org/waterways-safety-plan</a>
<b>International Maritime Association (IMO) Area’s to Be Avoided (ATBA)</b>	<a href="https://alaskaosro.org/wp-content/uploads/Aleutian-ATBA-Coords-w-diagram-14-1.pdf">https://alaskaosro.org/wp-content/uploads/Aleutian-ATBA-Coords-w-diagram-14-1.pdf</a>
<b>U.S. Coast Guard Marine Safety Information Bulletin (MSIB)</b>	<a href="https://www.dco.uscg.mil/Featured-Content/Mariners/Marine-Safety-Information-Bulletins-MSIB/">https://www.dco.uscg.mil/Featured-Content/Mariners/Marine-Safety-Information-Bulletins-MSIB/</a>
<b>U.S. Coast Guard Force Majeure</b>	<a href="https://www.govinfo.gov/app/details/CFR-2023-title33-vol2/CFR-2023-title33-vol2-sec160-215">https://www.govinfo.gov/app/details/CFR-2023-title33-vol2/CFR-2023-title33-vol2-sec160-215</a>
<b>NOAA Fisheries Stellar Sea Lion Haul outs and rookeries</b>	<a href="https://www.fisheries.noaa.gov/resource/data/stellar-sea-lion-haulout-and-rookery-locations-united-states-0">https://www.fisheries.noaa.gov/resource/data/stellar-sea-lion-haulout-and-rookery-locations-united-states-0</a>



## 6.2 Points of Contact

<b>U.S. Coast Guard Sector Western Alaska &amp; Arctic Command Center</b>		<b>Marine Exchange of Alaska 24 Hour Maritime Operations Center</b>	
1-907-428-4100 <a href="mailto:sectorwesternak@uscg.mil">sectorwesternak@uscg.mil</a>		1-907-463-2607 <a href="mailto:ops1@mxak.org">ops1@mxak.org</a>	
<b>Alaska Marine Pilots</b>			
1-907-581-1240 <a href="mailto:pilotdesk@ampilots.com">pilotdesk@ampilots.com</a>			
<b>APC Providers</b>			
<b>Alaska Chadux Network</b> 1-907-348-2300 <a href="mailto:MonitoringCenter@AlaskaOSRO.org">MonitoringCenter@AlaskaOSRO.org</a>		<b>1 Call Alaska</b> 1-907-243-0069 <a href="mailto:ops@1callalaska.com">ops@1callalaska.com</a>	
<b>Agents List<sup>1</sup></b>			
<b>Alaska Maritime Agencies</b> Dutch Harbor: 1-907-581-1467 <a href="mailto:dchops@alaskamaritime.com">dchops@alaskamaritime.com</a>	<b>Alaska Vessel Agents</b> Dutch Harbor: 1-907-581-4591 <a href="mailto:ava@alaskavesselagents.com">ava@alaskavesselagents.com</a>	<b>ANP Shipping</b> Anchorage: 1-907-272-6145 <a href="mailto:info@anpshipping.com">info@anpshipping.com</a>	
<b>Cruise Line Agencies of Alaska</b> Dutch Harbor: 1-907-581-1467 <a href="mailto:dchops@claa.com">dchops@claa.com</a>		<b>Yacht Services of Alaska</b> Ketchikan: 1-907-225-2200 <a href="mailto:yachts@claalaska.com">yachts@claalaska.com</a>	

## 7. Conclusion

Effective storm avoidance in the Aleutian Islands requires meticulous planning, continuous monitoring, and prompt decision-making. Predictable & planned Storm Avoidance is a normal practice and does not automatically constitute force majeure. While invoking force majeure can help manage legal implications of **unforeseen** severe weather events, it is important to monitor and study the routinely challenging weather in this remote region. Masters should seek legal advice and understand the implications of invoking force majeure for unpredictable events prior to your voyage. *Masters operating in the U.S. Aleutian Islands compelled to declare Force Majeure must do so in compliance with [33 CFR 160.215](#) and report their intentions to U.S. Coast Guard Sector Western Alaska and Arctic.*

These recommendations have been provided to aid vessels transiting through U.S. waters adjacent to the Aleutian and Pribilof Islands.

<sup>1</sup>Board of Marine Pilots Registered Vessel Agents:  
<https://www.commerce.alaska.gov/web/cbpl/ProfessionalLicensing/BoardofMarinePilots/RegisteredVesselAgents.aspx>