

Aleutian Islands Waterways Safety Committee

Meeting Summary

March 31, 2026

12:00pm – 2:00pm (AKDT) via Teleconference

Managing Board

Captain Buddy Custard (USCG, Ret.), President
Shari Coleman, Secretary/Treasurer
Martha Grabowski, Member

Committee Members Present

Chris Woodley – At Sea Fish Processors, Primary
Patrick Burns – Barges & Associated Tugs, Alternate
Captain Chris Iszler – Assist Tugs, Primary
Branden Kroon – Assist Tugs, Alternate
Ernie Weiss – Local Government, Primary
James McNamara – P&I Clubs, Primary
Kyle Watson – Salvage, Alternate
Andrew Hartsig – Conservation Organization, Primary
Karen Pletnikoff – Subsistence User, Primary
Captain Steve White – Vessel Monitoring & Tracking, Primary

Ex Officio

Bernie Nowicki, ADEC
Ethan Nichols, ADF&G
LCDR Caroline Wilkinson, NOAA
Carley Lowe, NOAA
Nadine Kochuten, ABSI
Bridget Crokus, USFWS
U.S. Coast Guard
Captain Christopher Culpepper (COTP)
LT Brett Woodward
LT Annabelle Gagnon

Other

LTJG Aaron Motis, USCG (MSU Valdez)
Ryan Saporito, Sea Tow Wrightsville Beach
Sierra Fletcher, Nuka Research
Haley Griffin, Nuka Research

The twelfth meeting of the Aleutian Islands Waterways Safety Committee (AIWSC) was called to order at 12:02 PM AKDT by President Buddy Custard, who chaired in place of Peggy McLaughlin. The agenda was amended to include a new business item regarding vessel traffic impacts on walrus near Togiak.

Motion Captain White, Karen Pletnikoff to approve the agenda as amended. Motion passes with no objection.

Motion Martha Grabowski, Steve White to approve the meeting summary from November 4, 2025, as presented. Motion passes with no objection.

Introductions and Opening Comments

Haley Griffin welcomed new committee member Jamie McNamara and conducted roll call. Opening remarks emphasized the importance of maintaining safe operations during the busy spring and summer season.

Ex Officio Reports

USCG

Captain Christopher Culpepper reported that the ongoing DHS funding lapse continues to affect operations, including delays in credentialing and inspections due to furloughs. Efforts are underway to establish a Bering Strait Waterways Safety Committee, and members were encouraged to participate. An invitation for the meeting was sent out by the USCG Waterways Management Division that included a registration link and Frequently Asked Questions. He thanked Marine Exchange and Nuka Research for their collaboration. Buddy added that Captain Culpepper will be transitioning from his position as Captain of the Port in late spring, and a change of command ceremony will take place on June 12 at JBER. He thanked Captain Culpepper for his strong support for the AIWSC.

NOAA

LCDR Caroline Wilkinson shared that the state is hosting an Alaska Seismic and Tsunami Operations Workshop June 2-4 in Unalaska. The workshop will bring together emergency managers, response partners, scientists, and community stakeholders to discuss tsunami hazards, preparedness, response coordination, and mitigation strategies. Aleutian Islands coastal communities have been invited to participate. She will forward the workshop details for distribution to the committee. Members were encouraged to reach out to Mike Lucio (michael.lucio@alaska.gov) for more information. NOAA has also [funded 9 seismic stations](#) along

the Aleutians to produce real-time data on tsunami detection. Work is also ongoing on St. Matthew Island to evaluate small cruise ship landings.

USFWS

Bridget Crokus shared that it was Jeff Williams' last day as the Alaska Maritime National Wildlife Refuge Deputy Manager before his retirement. Jeff has been involved with the AIWSC for many years. Heather Renner will be acting Deputy Refuge Manager moving forward. USFWS is working to fill the Deputy Spill Response Coordinator position. Bridget plans to connect this individual with the AIWSC when the position is filled.

ADF&G

Ethan Nichols reported on managed and co-managed fisheries in the Aleutian Islands and Bering Sea. The eastern and western Tanner crab fisheries will close at midnight on March 31 and are nearly fully harvested. 99% of the catch for the eastern Tanner crab fishery was landed, and 97% (or 10.1 million lbs) of the western Tanner crab fishery was landed, with additional landings expected before the deadline. The Bering Sea snow crab fishery is 62% landed with 3.5 million lbs still available. Thirteen vessels have registered for this fishery, some of whom also participated in the Tanner crab fishery. The Pacific cod fishery fleet in Dutch Harbor is made of vessels 58ft or less and are using pot gear. In this fishery, 17 million lbs have been landed, with 22 million lbs left to harvest. ADF&G has registered thirteen vessels for the nearshore Dungeness crab fishery (May 1 – October 31) on the north side of Unimak Island.

Captain Culpepper asked how fishing vessel exams and inspections are going. While there are no specific concerns from ADF&G, they have been directing operators to the correct location for USCG vessel inspection registration and providing reminders to call with 24 hr notice for the crab fishery registration. LT Annabelle Gagnon thanked Ethan for updating USCG contact info on the registration sheet. Captain Culpepper reminded the group to schedule inspections early. He also mentioned that LT Gagnon will be remaining at her position in Dutch Harbor for another year.

ABSI

Nadine Kochuten reported [Adapt Alaska Coasts](#) project development, with 4 workshops held around Coastal Alaska to identify nature-based solutions and community-led projects to increase coastal resilience. Efforts are also underway to support community training initiatives that build capacity to secure funding and access the technical expertise to implement local projects. ABSI and the Northern Latitudes Partnership (NLP) are supporting the Association of Village Council Presidents (AVCP) recovery efforts from Ex Typhoon Halong impacts in the Yukon-Kuskokwim Delta region. ABSI is participating in [Alaska Impact Days](#) on April 8-9 in Anchorage and will also be presenting their work at the Alaska Seismic and Tsunami Operations workshop in Unalaska in June. ABSI is working with APIA to develop a Sustainable Materials Management Plan (SMMP) for the region and plans to engage industry partners via the AIWSC soon. Currently, community waste stream data is being compiled. More information on ABSI and the NLP can be found here: <https://www.northernlatitudes.org/>

Work Group Reports

Waterways Safety Plan (WSP)

Buddy noted that Steven Gabelein has transitioned to Gallagher Marine Systems and vacated the work group Chair seat. Andrew Hartsig and Captain White volunteered to continue leading efforts to revise and streamline the WSP. Work group members have provided great input to the Plan, and all recommended updates have been compiled. Sierra Fletcher stated that Nuka Research can assist with making updates to the Plan and have begun to remove redundant information and produce a clean document. Karen Pletnikoff thanked the work group for their input and expressed interest in having discussions amongst marine mammal commissions and co-management groups on the implementation of the Polar Code. A next draft of the plan will be prepared for workgroup review by the end of April.

Storm Avoidance

Captain White thanked work group members for their contributions, noting strong input from industry, shoreside partners, and communities. With the document now complete, the focus has shifted to distribution – particularly to operating fleets and weather routing services. The group discussed the need to ensure consistency with other existing guidance, such as the local heavy weather guidelines for Dutch Harbor. Updates to the Coast Pilot were also highlighted as a priority; Captain White will resend this information to LCDR Wilkinson. Additional discussion covered aids to navigation (ATONs) in areas like Akutan Pass, and the importance of notifying USCG partners so they can distribute updates through Marine Safety Information

Bulletins (MSIBs). Future efforts will include committee discussions of vessel adherence to the guidance and improving outreach to vessels transiting through the region, including those in innocent passage.

Managing Board Report

Buddy reported that the Board recently met and the AIWSC currently holds approximately \$3,600, with additional funds pending deposit. Contributions will be recognized on the AIWSC website. Appreciation was expressed for APIA's continued funding support. A key priority of the Board includes maintaining committee members through sustained recruitment. From the Committee's perspective, updating the WSP, distributing the Storm Avoidance guidance, and identifying remaining safety gaps in the region are top priorities.

Facilitator's Report

Haley Griffin reported that the 30-day solicitation period for vacant committee seats has closed, but applications will continue to be accepted. She encouraged the group to share her contact information with any individuals who may be interested.

New Business

Caution Required When Navigating in Arctic Waters

LCDR Wilkinson provided an update Polar Code compliance and Coast Pilot revisions. The Arctic Council working group, Protection of the Arctic Marine Environment (PAME) has developed advisory language emphasizing the rapidly changing and poorly charted Arctic environment, encouraging cautious navigation and adherence to Polar Code standards. These updates are expected to be published in the Coast Pilot alongside a broader outreach campaign beginning in late April. Captain Culpepper reported ongoing efforts to increase Polar Code compliance through targeted exams, noting relatively few compliant vessels currently operating in the region and only 13 compliance exams provided. The USCG's Port Access Route Study remains delayed, in part due to backlog from furloughs and missed submission deadlines, with further progress expected to take additional time.

National Harbor Safety Conference

Buddy provided a report to the group on the National Harbor Safety Conference held in late March. He highlighted strong attendance and valuable collaboration across ports, agencies, and industry. Key themes included the role of technology in maritime safety, challenges related to aging infrastructure, and the importance of training for shipboard fire response. The differences between structural and vessel firefighting was emphasized, as well as the need for improved training and coordination.

The Salvage and Marine Firefighting national work group is looking to provide guidance to support shoreside response. There was also discussion of emergency response scenarios involving vessel collisions and fuel type risks, including when fuel types differ amongst the vessels involved. LT Gagnon mentioned that a new chief will be coming into the Dutch Harbor fire department this summer, and there are plans to train firefighters to learn what vessel fire safety plans look like on the freight vessels that come into port and how to support response to a fire. Captain White will connect LT Gagnon with someone in Portland who has developed guidance on shoreside firefighting support.

Captain White added that lessons learned from incidents that occur in Alaska (e.g., Genius Star) were highlighted nationally. The role of Harbor Safety Committees in connecting stakeholders, sharing best practices and education materials, building trust across sectors, and improving coordination to maintain safe maritime operations was repeatedly highlighted throughout the conference. A national website is in development to improve connections and resource sharing across Committees.

Walrus Island Protection Transit Area

Chris Woodley raised concerns about the amendment to the federal fishery management plan regarding vessel traffic impacts on walrus populations near Kodiak, particularly in the Togiak Bay area. Existing protections, including designated transit areas, primarily apply to commercial fishing vessels and may not fully address impacts from other vessel types such as tankers and tug and barge operations. Members discussed the need to better align these protections across vessel types and incorporate relevant guidance into the WSP. Bridget noted that existing recommendations are fragmented across multiple sources and that improved coordination and communication—potentially including geofencing and AIS messaging—could help ensure mariners are aware of sensitive areas. There was general agreement to incorporate these considerations into the WSP and develop best practices for minimizing disturbance to walrus and other marine mammals.

Closing Comments

The meeting concluded with appreciation for member participation and recognition of Captain Culpepper's leadership and contributions ahead of his departure. Members were encouraged to remain vigilant in maritime operations and report and suspicious or unusual activity.

Next Meeting Date

The next meeting will take place in mid-late September. A doodle poll will be sent out to determine a date.

Review Action Items

- Captain White will send recommended Coast Pilot updates to LCDR Wilkinson.
- Nuka Research will:
 - Make updates to the WSP for work group review by the end of April.
 - Distribute Seismic and Tsunami Operations Workshop information to the committee.
 - Distribute the finalized Guidance for Vessel Storm Avoidance in the Aleutian Islands.
 - Draft a meeting summary for the Committee's review.
 - Send a Doodle Poll to the Committee to determine availability for the next meeting.

Motion Captain White, Chris Woodley to adjourn the meeting. Meeting adjourned at 1:40 PM AKDT.

Meeting Materials: 1) Committee Roster, 2) November 4, 2025, Meeting Summary, 3) Guidance for Vessel Storm Avoidance in the Aleutian Islands, and 4) Caution Required When Navigating in Arctic Waters