

# Much has been done to reduce spill risk in Inlet

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By [Mike Munger](#)

Frank Mullen (Are we better prepared for a big Cook Inlet spill? in the Sept. 25 Homer News) accuses Cook Inlet Regional Citizens Advisory Council (RCAC), regulatory agencies and the Cook Inlet community of complacency in oil spill prevention and response, ironically, within the context of a multi-year effort to assess risks to navigational safety in Cook Inlet.

I don't doubt Mr. Mullen's genuine concern about oil spills in Cook Inlet, but I do take exception to his throwing rocks from the sidelines at the people working the problem. They include local mariners who met numerous times during the development of the Cook Inlet Maritime Risk Assessment, citizens representing local communities and interest groups on the Cook Inlet RCAC Board of Directors, and public members of our working committees. I am proud to be associated with all of them.

As mandated by the Oil Pollution Act of 1990 (OPA 90), Cook Inlet producers fund the Cook Inlet RCAC to represent the citizens of Cook Inlet in promoting environmentally safe marine transportation and oil facility operations in Cook Inlet. Each year, we must earn recertification where our activities and actions are measured against OPA 90 mandates, and this year more than 50 individuals and organizations endorsed our recertification.

Our board of directors and staff serve with integrity and with measures in place that allow us to fulfill our mission without the undue influence of those companies required to fund us. For nearly 25 years, Cook Inlet RCAC has been the primary impetus for significant changes and improvements in navigational safety and oil spill prevention and response in Cook Inlet.

We conceived of and installed the first-ever ice forecasting network of cameras to help minimize the risks posed to mariners by the broken, mobile seasonal ice in the Inlet. We initiated a coastal habitat mapping program to improve our understanding of and ability to protect shorelines most at risk from oil spills, and which resulted in a state-wide ShoreZone Partnership of dozens of organizations and agencies. We worked with the state of Alaska, industry and local citizens to

develop Alaska's first Geographic Response Strategies, pre-identified site-specific response plans for protecting especially sensitive or culturally important areas.

We further worked with partners to develop a Cook Inlet Response Tool that merges shoreline imagery and habitat data with real time weather data, ocean current models, GRS and resource data layers to aid in oil spill planning and speed response. We successfully advocated for a dedicated docking assist tug in Nikiski.

Additionally, we have reviewed and commented on hundreds of vessel, facility, state, regional and federal contingency plans (and participate in drills of the plans), speaking on behalf of the diverse groups of stakeholders we represent. It is because of this broad representation and our successful partnerships that we are an effective and credible organization.

Most recently, Cook Inlet RCAC is proud to have joined the state of Alaska and U.S. Coast Guard on the Management Team of the Cook Inlet Maritime Risk Assessment.

To clarify, this is not "Cook Inlet RCAC's risk assessment," although we were instrumental in making it come to fruition and securing its funding. Instead, the risk assessment was mandated by the 2010 U.S. Coast Guard Authorization Act. The process followed National Academy of Sciences methodology and combined the input of informed stakeholders with technical analyses and funding from the state of Alaska, the U.S. Coast Guard, Prince William Sound RCAC, National Fish and Wildlife Foundation and Tesoro Alaska. Public input was solicited throughout the multi-year process, including a two-month comment period last winter asking for suggestions for risk reduction methods.

Priority was given to risk reduction options that could be implemented immediately and research conducted on options requiring further study for consideration, guided by an advisory panel that included multiple stakeholders with tremendous expertise, including marine pilots, tug and tanker captains, fishermen, Alaska Native groups and scientists. The Draft Final Report includes an assessment of the risk of a drift grounding in Cook Inlet and analysis of whether existing tug capability combined with self-arrest is sufficient to address this risk.

Rather than disparage the efforts and progress of those who have devoted countless hours to this endeavor, a more positive approach is to participate in the process. It's not too late. The risk assessment team has extended the public comment period on the Draft Final Report to Oct. 27. Even when this report is completed, there will be more work to do to implement the recommendations and many opportunities to be part of the solution. For more information, visit [www.cookinletriskassessment.com](http://www.cookinletriskassessment.com) or [www.circac.org](http://www.circac.org).

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