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Cutter SPAR tests towing system off Kotzebue

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The Kodiak-based Coast Guard cutter SPAR is maneuvering in Kotzebue Sound today as it tests an emergency towing system in the sea approaches to the world's largest zinc mine.

The tests are considered important to ensure the towing system can be used under arctic conditions.

In 2004, the ship Selendang Ayu grounded on Unalaska Island, spilling 336,000 gallons of crude oil and a cargo of soybeans. The grounding happened despite efforts by tugs and the Coast Guard cutter Alex Haley to corral the wayward ship.

A report issued by the Coast Guard found inadequate equipment, poor training and bad weather were to blame.

In response, the Alaska Department of Environmental Conservation, the city of Unalaska, the Coast Guard and other organizations teamed up to develop the emergency towing system, which was successfully tested in 2007.

It was used again in December, when the tug Tor Viking II towed the adrift freighter Golden Seas to Dutch Harbor for repairs.

In today's towing practice, the SPAR is scheduled to simulate a disabled freighter, and a local tug will use an emergency towing system delivered by an Air Station Kodiak C-130 to pull the SPAR.

The towing training is one part of a number of offshore activities happening near the mine this summer. The NOAA ship Fairweather, based in Ketchikan, has been mapping the approaches to Delong Mountain Terminal, the port for carrying zinc concentrate away from Red Dog Mine.

The missions come as Red Dog prepares to open the Aqqaluk Deposit, an enormous concentration of lead and zinc that the operators of the mine said is enough to keep it operating for the next 20 years.

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