

# Description of the Alaska Marine Highway System

The mission of the Alaska Marine Highway System (AMHS) is to serve Alaskan communities by providing passenger, freight (van), and vehicle transportation service between communities without land highway connections. This service helps meet the social, educational, health and economic needs of Alaskans.

AMHS provides year-round scheduled ferry service throughout southeast and southwest Alaska, extending south to Prince Rupert, British Columbia and Bellingham, Washington. The system connects communities with each other, with regional centers, and with the continental road system. It is an integral part of Alaska's highway system, reaching many communities that would otherwise be effectively cut off from the rest of the state and nation.

The AMHS is designed to provide basic transportation services to these communities—transportation that allows community access to health services, commodities, legal services, government services, and social services; transportation that meets the social needs of isolated communities; and transportation that provides a base for economic development.

**Service and Amenities.** AMHS service is divided into two major systems: the southeast system (from Bellingham north to Skagway) and the southwest system (from Cordova west to Unalaska/Dutch Harbor). The AMHS fleet consists of eight vessels; six operate in the southeast system and two operate in the southwest system. All vessels are designed to carry passengers and vehicles ranging in size from motorcycles to large freight container vans.

Trips on the AMHS can last several hours or several days, so passenger services are an important aspect of the state's transportation service. All vessels provide food service, shower and restroom facilities, observation lounges, and reclining lounges. The larger vessels provide play areas for children. Five vessels have stateroom accommodations for overnight travel, or for passengers who want a space they can call their own while traveling. The AMHS also offers special interest programs on-board its vessels, including naturalist interpreter programs and Alaskan culture programs.

**Freight Transport.** One regular use of the AMHS is the year-round shipment of container vans. These vans transport time-sensitive cargo such as fresh vegetables, meat, and dairy products from Bellingham and regional Alaskan centers to communities served by the system.

Local restaurants, grocery stores, individuals, and food distribution businesses have established delivery schedules with the AMHS to ensure regular and continuous delivery of perishable goods. Shipping perishable supplies on AMHS is more cost-effective than air freight, and in many cases ensures delivery to communities on a more frequent basis than commercial barge and freight lines. Vans are also used to move fresh Alaska fish and seafood to markets, to transport U.S. mail, and household goods.

**Planned service reductions.** During the fall and winter months all vessels are scheduled for annual maintenance which normally requires six weeks minimum per ship. This results in reduced service. Major projects to refurbish the vessels and to bring them into compliance with new SOLAS (Safety of Life at Sea) requirements also keeps vessels out of service. Vessels are put into lay-up during periods of low traffic demand, or as a means to reduce operating costs. During 1997, two vessels were out of service for project work, and three other vessels were laid up. (See 1997 Operating Plan, pg. 6).

## Southeast Alaska Routes

The southeast AMHS route system is divided into two subsystems: the mainline routes and the feeder routes. The mainline routes provide service between Bellingham, Washington or Prince Rupert, British Columbia and Skagway, Alaska with stops in Ketchikan, Wrangell, Petersburg, Sitka, Juneau, and Haines. Prince of Wales Island, Hoonah and Kake also receive mainline service from the M/V Taku, but the number of stops is limited because these communities are served primarily by feeder vessels. The mainline routes carry a high percentage of tourists in the summer.

The four largest AMHS vessels, the M/V Columbia, M/V Malaspina, M/V Matanuska, and M/V Taku, are used on the southeast mainline routes.

The feeder routes connect the smaller communities of southeast Alaska with each other and with the southeast Alaska mainline communities (Ketchikan, Petersburg, Wrangell, Sitka, Juneau, Haines and Skagway) that serve as regional centers for commerce, government, health services, and/or connections to other transportation systems. The feeder routes serve primarily local residents, and include Angoon, Hollis, Hoonah, Hyder, Kake, Metlakatla, Pelican, and Tenakee.

The M/V Aurora and the M/V LeConte provide service on the feeder routes. When both vessels are in operation, the M/V LeConte serves the area between Petersburg and Skagway, and the M/V Aurora operates between Ketchikan, Metlakatla, and Hollis, with limited service to Hyder. Service to Hyder is discontinued in the winter due to low traffic volume. When either vessel is off-line, the other vessel provides service for the entire feeder route system.

The southeast system connects with the continental road system at Bellingham, Washington; Stewart, British Columbia (Hyder); Prince Rupert, British Columbia; Haines, Alaska; and Skagway, Alaska.

### **Southwest Alaska Routes**

The southwest system serves Prince William Sound, Kodiak Island, the Alaskan Peninsula, and the Aleutian Islands. The M/V Tustumena provides regular service between Kodiak, Port Lions, Seldovia, Homer and Seward. The M/V Tustumena also makes trips to Valdez and Cordova. Approximately six times each year, between April and October, the M/V Tustumena travels out the Aleutian chain to Unalaska/Dutch Harbor, stopping at Chignik, Sand Point, King Cove, False Pass, Akutan and Cold Bay enroute. This trip is not made in the winter because of adverse weather conditions. Monthly "whistle-stop" service is also provided to Chenega Bay on the route between Seward and Cordova or Valdez.

Service in Prince William Sound to Valdez, Cordova and Whittier is provided by the M/V Bartlett. "Whistle-stop" service is also provided to Tatitlek/Ellamar. Tourists comprise a high percentage of the Prince William Sound traffic in the summer, especially between Valdez and Whittier.

In the winter months, when traffic demand is significantly reduced, and weather conditions worsened, service is suspended to Whittier and reduced between Valdez and Cordova. When the M/V Bartlett is out of service, the M/V Tustumena provides service between Valdez and Cordova. When the M/V Tustumena is off-line, however, there is no other open-ocean certified vessel in the fleet to replace it and service to Kodiak, Port Lions, Homer, Seward, and Seldovia is suspended. The southwest system connects with the continental road system at Valdez, Homer, Seward, and Whittier (via the Alaska Railroad to Portage).

### **System Changes in 1997**

A fishermen's blockade of the M/V Malaspina on July 19, 1997 resulted in a 138-day suspension of service to the Canadian port of Prince Rupert. Limited service was restored Dec. 4, with one trip per week by the M/V Aurora. The disruption had a major impact on AMHS traffic. An emergency schedule was put into place that routed all mainline vessels to Bellingham. Initially, travelers who had booked travel to or from Prince Rupert had the option to travel to Bellingham for the same fare. While many changed their traveling plans, many more simply cancelled their tickets rather than wait for guaranteed availability. RV traffic was especially affected. Whereas total passengers and vehicles declined by 4% for the year, the number of RVs was down by 12%. Overall for 1997, the service disruption reduced total traffic and lowered the average number of ports served per week.

### **Changes Ahead for 1998**

The M/V Kennicott joins the fleet in summer 1998, the first new vessel for the AMHS in more than 20 years. As a vessel certified to operate in open waters, the M/V Kennicott will expand service to include regular trans-gulf sailings, connecting southeastern Alaska with south central and southwest regions of the state.