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Commentary

Russian tanker's voyage to Nome, a modern-day serum run

Captain Pete Garay | Jan 01, 2012



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As Alaska turns from 2011 to the New Year, a team effort reminiscent of the famous Iditarod serum run to Nome is underway to bring desperately needed fuel supplies to Nome. The Russia-flagged, ice-strengthened tanker *Renda*, along with her crew, are attempting to make history with the first ever fuel delivery to Western Alaska in the heart of winter. This is the stuff "sea stories" are made of and -- as in the case of Alaska's Nome serum run -- how history is made.

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To accomplish this historical feat, *Renda* will have to plough her way through some 250 miles (and growing) of hardening pack ice in temperatures that could plunge well into the minus double digits. Her partner in this effort will be the US Coast Guard (USCG) Ice Breaker *Healy* who will be the muscle that will help the *Renda* get to Nome, and back, safely.

Behind this effort are myriad logistical issues. For nearly a month now, a team of committed men and woman from both the private and public sectors are working together to ensure these two vessels successfully complete their mission.

The level of effort to accomplish this New Year's delivery to Nome is significant. The USCG holds daily planning sessions with all partners involved in this mission. Each morning weather and ice routing experts from across the globe are providing daily updates. Vessel owners, ship's agents, the officers and crew members of both the *Healy* and the *Renda*, and the Alaska Marine Pilots continue to refine an optimum sea plan which will ensure the tanker *Renda* arrives and departs our state no worse for wear.

Sitnasuak Native Corporation initiated the effort by locating and chartering the *Renda*. The Alaska Department of Environmental Conservation (ADEC) is tracking the charter's progress and ensuring discharge plans minimize the risk of possible fuel spillage. The Maritime Administration (MARAD) has secured a Jones Act waiver. The City of Nome, the University of Alaska and many others are lending their help to stage the necessary equipment in Nome harbor prior to the *Renda*'s arrival. Shipping agents including Vitus Marine and ALAMAR are expediting banking, customs, and immigration documents. While many of these efforts are not visible to most Alaskans this is truly a story of many "Baltos" pulling as one as that famous dog team did so miraculously in 1925.

As the Iditarod trail to Nome was far more than just a mere dog sled ride, we should closely follow this "sea story" as there is considerably more riding on the success of this mission than is immediately apparent. The story these ships will eventually tell will likely follow one of two scenarios.

The fuel is safely delivered to Nome, in which case it's proven that with good planning, the right tools and all due respect for our winter maritime environment, we can safely conduct commercial shipping operations in Northwestern Alaska's ice-covered seas. Given such a scenario, the stage is further set to usher in Alaska's first oil and gas exploration season off its northern coastline.

Or, it is determined the fuel delivery could not be made safely, in which case the *Renda* would be turned around prior to risk of life, limb or environmental damage to Alaska's coastline.

In either case, the mission will have been successful.

“Sea stories” can be short, or long. If they’re short, they are referred to as “coastwise,” denoting a shorter voyage, as opposed to a long “foreign” trip. At the conclusion of this mission, I’m certain there will be some good “coasters” for all to share, but more importantly I’m hopeful they tell the tale of a long and prosperous “foreign” voyage into America’s last energy frontier, our state’s northern waters, from which all Alaskans will benefit.

Just as proved in the Nome serum run, our ability to work with Western Alaska’s harsh environment and the hard-won expertise of these team members will prove Alaskans are the key to success in future developments in the Arctic.

We can make history again.

Captain Pete Garay has spent the last 20 years of his career working in the remote waters of Western Alaska as a State Licensed Marine Pilot. His most recent piloting assignment is the Renda.

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