

# Description of the Alaska Marine Highway System

The mission of the Alaska Marine Highway System (AMHS) is to provide safe, reliable and efficient transportation of people, goods and vehicles between Alaskan communities, Canada and the “lower 48 states” while providing opportunities to develop and maintain a reasonable standard of living and achieve a higher quality of life through improved access to social, educational, and health services.

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 Alaskans with basic 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 nine vessels; six operate in the southeast system and two operate in the southwest system. The ninth and newest vessel, the M/V Kennicott, began service July 1998. While primarily scheduled to operate in the southeast, this vessel also provided regular cross-gulf trips, connecting the southeast and southwest systems. All nine 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. Six 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, household goods and medical supplies.

**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 also put into lay-up during periods of low traffic demand, or as a means to reduce operating costs. During 1998, two vessels were out of service for project work, and three other vessels were laid up. (See 1998 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.

Four of the five largest AMHS vessels, the M/V Columbia, M/V Kennicott, M/V Matanuska, and M/V Taku, are used on the southeast mainline routes. A former mainliner, the M/V Malaspina, in 1998 was scheduled to operate exclusively on the Northern Lynn Canal route. During the peak summer season,