Shell Oil Rig Kulluk Safely Anchored in Kiliuda Bay

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Jay Barrett/KMXT

The Royal Dutch Shell drilling rig Kulluk is now safely anchored in Kiliuda Bay. A flotilla of eight vessels escorted the round, 266-foot oil rig during a pre-dawn voyage from Sitkalidak Island, where it has sat, grounded, for a week.

The Kulluk was pulled from the beach at 10:10 p.m. last night and towed at speeds up to 5 knots by the 360-foot tug Aiviq the 45 miles to its temporary place of refuge.

During a news conference just as the Kulluk was being anchored up in Kiliuda Bay, Shell VP Sean Churchfield said the operation went well:

“It has gone pretty much according to plan. We have been checking with the Nanuq and also with the salvage crew on board to confirm that the Kulluk remains intact. But I think to answer your question, the tow has gone pretty much has planned and there have been no major obstacles since the Kulluk was re-floated.”

Representatives from the Unified Command will be holding a community meeting in Old Harbor today (Monday), to brief the citizens closest to the incident, and will hold a similar meeting in Kodiak on Wednesday.

He also said his company would be paying for the Kulluk incident – at least for now:

“Certainly for the response phase, Shell is insuring all the resources required for the response are made available through the unified command to assist in this recovery effort.”

No fuel or lube oil leaked during the salvage or the tow. Steven Russell of the Alaska Department of Environmental Conservation said a ship with forward-looking infra-red cameras trailed the Kulluk and Aiviq and kept an eye for any petroleum in the water.

“The infra red technology used in oil spill response is looking at the specific density of the thin film that a petroleum product would put in relation to the surface of the ocean. It’s not necessarily giving you qualitative

answers as far as how much product is there, how thick it is. It’s looking at the surface density in comparison to sea water.”

Churchfield said the Kulluk would be secured by its own anchor in Kiliuda Bay, but failing that, as many of the various ocean-going tugs on scene as needed will work together to hold it in place.

The tug Aiviq, which towed the Kulluk into the bay, is the same ship that lost its engines for a half-hour in high seas when the Kulluk broke loose on New Year’s Eve. Captain Paul Mehler, the federal on-scene coordinator, says the Coast Guard took extra precautions during today’s tow.

“Currently there’s a Coast Guard Marine inspector on board the Aiviq during this operation, running in parallel with the crew, insuring that all the maintenance is done to ensure it’s safe.”