

Kulluk Loaded Atop Transfer Vessel

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Lauren Rosenthal/KUCB

Final preparations are being made to transfer Shell Oil's floating drill rig Kulluk to Asia.

Early yesterday morning, three tugboats maneuvered the Shell rig out of its berth in Unalaska and onto the deck of the partially submerged Xiang Rui Kou heavy lift vessel.

Before the operation started, marine pilot Carter Whalen said the Kulluk would be a challenge to move because of its domed shape.

"With three different tugs pulling on it with lines, it has a tendency to spin one way or the other. And once it starts spinning, it's hard to stop it from spinning. It slides transversely through the water," he said. "It's kind of a balancing act, rather than having to use a lot of power. It's kind of a finesse."

When reached yesterday aboard the Kulluk, Whalen said the tow went smoothly. Engineers ensured that the rig was properly positioned on the Xiang Rui Kou. Then, the heavy lift ship emptied its ballast tanks and floated its deck above the surface, taking the oil rig with it.

"Then there will be a four or five day process, once she's floated, where they will secure and weld and reinforce the Kulluk into position before they cross the Pacific."

The ships are expected to leave Unalaska toward the end of the week. They're bound for Asia, where the Kulluk will undergo repairs for damage from when the rig grounded near Kodiak on New Years Eve.