Kennicott Sailings Increase as Tusty Lingers

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Jay Barrett/KMXT

As we wait for the state ferry Tustumena to return to service, the Alaska Marine Highway System has announced a change to the ferry Kennicott’s September and October schedule. The system has added additional sailings between Kodiak and the Kenai Peninsula communities of Seldovia and Homer through October 17th. However there remains only one sailing to Unalaska with calls at what few communities on the Alaska Peninsula can accommodate the larger Kennicott. They have not seen ferry service since May.

Meanwhile, the Tustumena is scheduled to go back into the water on Friday (Sept. 20) of this week, after steel plating used in repairs was found to be too thin to pass Coast Guard inspections.

“Recent inspection by the U.S. Coast Guard, they found that there was some steel that was a little too thin for their standards and they required that that be replaced and redone on a couple different areas of the ship. The shipyard right now is working on doing that,” said ferry system spokesman Jeremy Woodrow. “It’s pushed the Tustumena back another couple weeks. We’re looking at having it in service mid October.”

Woodrow said the thin steel was used in watertight compartments in the ship’s hull. He said Seward Ships Drydock had the correct gauge steel in stock, and is using that now, but he’s not sure why it wasn’t used in the first place. It’s not the first time sub-par material has been found in repairs to the ship.

Even if the Tustumena goes back in the water on its latest scheduled date, Woodrow says there will still be work that needs to be done.

“It’s going to take two- to three-weeks of doing additional tests and work while its in the water as well, and so we’re looking at returning to service about mid October.

This is just the latest delay for the Tustumena, which has been in dry dock for various maintenance and repairs since last October. The ferry was originally scheduled to return to service in April. But faulty materials and shoddy workmanship have caused it to fail inspection after inspection by the Coast Guard.

“You know it has been a difficult time for the department. But we’re really focusing on making sure that we do get the ship back into service, and that when it does return to service it’ll be in the type of shape to be able to serve the communities of Southwest Alaska, Southcentral Alaska, for many more years before we can get the replacement of the Tustumena back on line. Or, in line.”