

USCG: Tusty Inspections Vital to Ensure Passenger Safety

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Jay Barrett/KMXT

Before the Alaska State ferry Tustumena can be put back into the water on Friday, it must again pass U.S. Coast Guard inspections. Inadequate material and poor workmanship have caused several months of delays in the Tusty's return to service.

Dan Buchsbaum is the chief of inspections for the Coast Guard's Sector Anchorage office. He said the Coast Guardsmen who conduct the inspections use a variety of tools in their work.

"We have a really good pair of eyes. That's what we use as a primary thing. But then the other that things we do is we rely on specialized technicians to come in and do certain things. We call it non-destructive testing. And they do that, particularly if you're doing welded repairs on the hull itself, usually we require a certain percentage of the welds that are done actually have some form of non-destructive testing done on them to verify that the welds were actually good."

The latest delay was because Seward Ships Drydock used steel plate in repairs that turned out to be too thin. It's not the first time that has been an issue during inspections.

"We found some things they had done unacceptable. Like, for example in a couple of instances they had mistakenly put in the wrong size of plate. They did not pass the non-destructive testing, so you could kind of call that inferior workmanship, but that's what I say the kind of the situation was."

The aging Tustumena has been in dry dock for very nearly a year now, and Buchsbaum agrees 50 is a ripe old age for such a vessel.

"But the ferry service has gone out and done a pretty good job making sure that it's maintained. And even if you have a vessel which is older, if you stay up with the maintenance on it, that's the key. You know, upgrading the systems that need to be upgraded, replacing the hull plate where it gets too thin. Those are the things you have to do and those are the kind of things the ferry system has attempted to do. And also, we work with the ferry system on a lot of things we find which need to be replaced or repaired on a vessel of this age."

Even if the Tusty does get back in the water Friday, Buchsbaum says there are plenty more inspections that will need to be done.

"I'll give you a couple of examples. On this vessels one of the things that has been done is they've had a complete change in the automation for the machinery systems; we'll be going through and testing all of that automation to make sure it works in accordance with the automation plans. Another thing we'll be doing is of course is testing the marine evacuation system, making sure the crew understands how to operate that system in the event that there is an emergency. And then of course we go back and we do our standard abandon ship and also our firefighting and man overboard drills. All those things have to be done once it gets back into the water."

Buchsbaum said that after so much work, the Tusty will have to have a new stability test done, but that will be conducted by a naval architect. The ferry system is hoping the Tustumena launches on Friday, and after those sea trials, return to service in mid October.