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Coast Guard Cutter Healy to Deploy

U.S. Coast Guard | March 05, 2008

SEATTLE - The nation's largest icebreaker, Coast Guard Cutter Healy, departs Seattle Thursday to prepare for its Arctic West summer 2008 deployment that will have the cutter in the northern Polar Regions for over six months.

During the deployment, Healy will travel more than 25,000 miles and conduct more than 2,000 individual science evolutions in the course of completing seven separate science missions. Healy will spend six weeks between the second and third missions in Seattle conducting scheduled maintenance and training.

Healy's two science missions this spring are part of the National Science Foundation's Bering Ecosystem Study (BEST) and the North Pacific Research Board's Bering Sea Integrated Ecosystem Research Program. They are timed to study ecological processes as sea ice retreats through the Bering Sea. The recent decline in the extent and duration of arctic sea ice has stimulated scientific as well as public interest in how the productive Bering Sea ecosystem will change if current warming trends continue. Healy scientists will launch a comprehensive suite of studies to provide insights about how marine microorganisms, plants and animals, fish, marine mammals and birds will be affected by the ongoing changes in the region. The two chief scientists coordinating the scientific missions explain that this work at the ice edge will use different sampling strategies, but will focus on a common goal of improving ecological understanding of the Bering Sea.

Healy will pick up the first team of scientists from Dutch Harbor, Alaska, in mid-March, and proceed into the central Bering Sea. The mission will focus on determining how the dynamics of walrus' movement relate to the supplies of small seafloor animals they consume as food.

According to chief scientist Lee Cooper of the University of Maryland, "Walrus are thought to become more vulnerable as the arctic sea ice disappears. The recent observations of stranded calves and the congregations of thousands of these animals along Arctic Ocean beaches last summer, when they historically used to feed from ice, seem consistent with that view."

Declining sources of winter food on the sea floor in the Bering Sea were documented in a study published in 2006 in Science magazine and may be a result of competing fish moving north. These concerns, among others, led to a recent petition to formally list walrus as threatened under the Endangered Species Act. According to Cooper, in addition to the walrus' work, the cruise plan includes efforts to study other important arctic species as well as the chemical and physical conditions in which they live.

The second research mission, which runs from early April to mid-May, is arguably the most ambitious scientific deployment Healy has ever undertaken, according to chief scientist Carin Ashjian of the Woods Hole Oceanographic Institution.

"Scientific berth space is entirely spoken for by scientists from universities, institutions and agencies across the United States and the rest of the world," Ashjian said. "We are adding to the extensive lab space already on Healy by seeking out temporary science vans that are essentially modified shipping containers for some of the scientists to work in."

The research program will focus on the entire Bering ecosystem and how it changes as the ice melts. Scientists will use sediment grabs, video plankton recorders, ice corers and a wide variety of other equipment to study everything from big seals and tiny plankton to the chemistry and physics of the Bering Sea, Ashjian said.

"I expect the overall study to pay great scientific dividends with all of the new scientific tools and approaches being used. We are also sharing and exchanging information with local residents of the Bering Sea region, which are dependent upon subsistence hunting and fishing and are greatly concerned about the prospects for climate change," she said.

Also joining the mission is middle school teacher Craig Kasemodel, who is participating in the mission through an International Polar Year research immersion program for teachers called PolarTREC. Students across the nation will participate in the research through conference calls and interactive blogs while Healy is underway.

Commanded by Coast Guard Capt. Ted Lindstrom, Healy is the newest and largest of

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the nation's three heavy icebreakers and the only one with extensive scientific capabilities. The 420-foot cutter was commissioned in 2000 and has a permanent crew of 80. Scientific support is Healy's primary mission, but as a Coast Guard Cutter, Healy is also capable of supporting other potential missions in the Polar Regions including logistics, search and rescue, ship escort, environmental protection, and the enforcement of laws and treaties.

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