


Nome, Alaska To Reconnect With World When Renda Tanker Delivers Fuel



[MARY PEMBERTON](#) 01/15/12 09:44 PM ET Associated Press 

NOME, Alaska — Crews worked to build a path Sunday over a half-mile of Bering Sea ice for the final leg of a Russian tanker's mission to deliver fuel to a town isolated amid one of the most severe Alaska winters in decades.

The tanker was moored roughly a half-mile from Nome's harbor after a Coast Guard cutter cleared a path for it through hundreds of miles of a slow journey stalled by thick ice and strong ocean currents.

The tanker got into position Saturday night, and ice disturbed by its journey had to freeze again so workers could create some sort of roadway to lay a hose that will transfer 1.3 million gallons of fuel from the tanker to the harbor in Nome.

On Sunday, workers spent the morning walking around the vessel and checking the ice to make sure it was safe to lay the hose, which will take about four hours, said Jason Evans, board chairman of the Sitnasuak Native Corp.

With the tanker and the Coast Guard ice breaker sitting just offshore and poised to deliver the fuel, Evans said the bulk of the mission's biggest challenges were behind the crew, but a lot of work remained.

Still, the final job of transferring fuel from the ship to the town comes with its own hurdles: In addition to waiting for the ice to freeze, crews must begin the transfer in daylight, a state mandate. And Nome has just five hours of daylight this time of year.

"In theory, it was possible and in reality, it now is done," Evans said of the journey.

A storm prevented Nome's 3,500 residents from getting a fuel delivery by barge in November. Without the tanker delivery, supplies of diesel fuel, gasoline and home heating fuel were expected to run out in March and April, well before a barge delivery again in late May or June.

The especially harsh winter has left snow piled up 10 feet or higher against the wood-sided buildings in Nome, a former gold rush town that is the final stop on the Iditarod dog sled race. On Sunday, everything was covered in a layer of wind-blown snow and vehicles looked frozen in place, as though they haven't been moved in weeks.

The tanker began its journey from Russia in mid-December, picking up diesel fuel in South Korea before heading to Dutch Harbor,

Alaska, where it took on unleaded gasoline. Late Thursday, the vessels stopped offshore and began planning the transfer to Nome, more than 500 miles from Anchorage on Alaska's west coast.

In total, the tanker traveled an estimated 5,000 miles going from Russia to South Korea, then toward Japan and to Dutch Harbor and Nome, said Rear Adm. Thomas Ostebo, commander of District Seventeen with the Coast Guard.

Despite the complicated logistics of delivering fuel by sea in winter, Sitnasuak opted for the extra delivery after determining that it would be much less costly and more practical than flying fuel to Nome.

Mark Smith, CEO of Vitus Marine LLC, the fuel supplier that arranged to have the Russian tanker and its crew deliver the fuel, described the challenges as substantial, partly because winter has been especially harsh in the region this year. He said that moving the tanker even with the help of the cutter through more than 300 miles of pack-ice was a "very profound obstacle."

"It seems that every day brought a new crisis," he said.

Opinion appeared to be divided in Nome, where some welcomed the arrival of the tanker and others thought it was a manufactured and unnecessary crisis.

Cari Miller was among the residents unconvinced a real crisis was at hand. The 43-year-old mother, who has lived in Nome for eight years, said she believed that another fuel provider in town had plenty of fuel for the community.

"We do not have a fuel crisis," she said. "It wasn't necessary."

Kwan Yi, 40, a maintenance worker at the Polaris Bar in Nome, faulted Sitnasuak for not arranging for barge delivery earlier last fall, but said he believed the town was in need of fuel. He said he was pleased the fuel tanker had arrived after struggling with frozen pipes and gas leaks.

U.S. Sen. Lisa Murkowski, who flew to Nome on Sunday, said the town's ordeal had captured the world's attention as it displayed a reality of Alaska life.

"This is real. This is what we deal with," the senator said, while making an appeal for more resource to be placed in the Arctic.

The crew of the 370-foot tanker Renda was working to ensure safety in the transfer of the fuel through the segmented hose, Coast Guard spokesman Kip Wadlow said in a telephone interview from Nome on Saturday night.

Once crews created a suitable path for the hose to rest on, its segments were to be bolted together and inspected before the fuel can begin to flow.

Though the transfer must start during daylight, it can continue in darkness, Betty Schorr of the Alaska Department of Environmental Conservation has said. It could be finished within 36 hours if everything goes smoothly, but it could take as long as five days, she said.

Evans said once the hose is laid, personnel will walk its entire length every 30 minutes to check for leaks. Each segment of hose will have its own spill containment area, and extra absorbent boom will be on hand in case of a spill.

Evans, however, cautioned that delivering the fuel is only half the mission.

"The ships need to transition back through 300 miles of ice," he said. "I say we're not done until the ships are safely back at their home ports" in Seattle and Russia.

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