

For Immediate Release

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Alaska Fishing Industry Relief Mission

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## **ALASKA EXPORTS 16-TON HELPING HAND TO GULF RELIEF**

Valdez, AK, Feb. 8 – A 16-ton Marine Travelift left Valdez, Alaska Wednesday on the first leg of a 4,500-mile journey to a new job helping fishermen in faraway Louisiana, according to Mark Vinsel, the chairman of the Alaska Fishing Industry Relief Mission, Inc. (AFIRM).

The Travelift, which served Valdez for several years, is capable of lifting a 60-ton boat and putting it gently back in the water. It was donated by the City of Valdez to Plaquemines Parish, Louisiana, where it will immediately be put to work getting hundreds of stranded commercial fishing boats back in the water and letting their owners go back to earning a living.

It's all part of an Alaska fishing industry effort to help Gulf Coast fishermen who were put out of work by last year's devastating hurricanes. AFIRM was formed by fishing interests at the suggestion of U.S. Senator Lisa Murkowski (R-AK), who is the honorary chair of its advisory group.

Murkowski noted, "Alaskans know what it's like to be hit by an overwhelming disaster, and we know that sometimes help from a friend can be faster and more on-target than waiting for the official bureaucracy to move. We simply wanted to be that kind of friend. Alaska and the Gulf are two of the most prominent fishing regions of the U.S., and we think it's important to stand together."

The massive machine will travel from Valdez to Houston, Texas courtesy of Carlile Transportation, an Alaska company based in Anchorage, which is not charging for the long trip. Carlile's owner, Harry McDonald, said "We agreed to do it as a donation to AFIRM because it was the right thing to do. We've been blessed and this is a way to give a little back."

In Houston, plans call for the lift to be transferred to a truck from Packard Truck Lines of Louisiana, a Plaquemines Parish company, for the final leg to its new home.

AFIRM also arranged for a technical expert from the manufacturer, Marine Travelift, Inc. of Wisconsin to fly to Valdez to oversee dismantling and packing the lift for its long trip, and to travel to Louisiana to put it all back together again. Northwest Airlines is providing air travel for the technician, also as a donation to AFIRM.

Hundreds of Gulf Coast fishing vessels were pushed by storm surge into areas from which – when the storms subsided – they could no longer reach the sea. The Federal government has been pulling them from bayous, backyards and parking lots, but stockpiling them on dry land in a local boatyard with no way to put them back in the water.

The Plaquemines Parish government, which owns the boatyard, also lost its old launching equipment in the storms, and new equipment cannot be obtained from the manufacturer for several more months.

Alan Sorum, the harbormaster in faraway Valdez, heard about the problem, and after discussing it with others, including Alaska and Louisiana university Sea Grant staff, went to work to convince the city government to take a hand. Sorum noted, "We worked with a very dedicated group of people across the entire country to make it happen, and we were glad to do it. We know how important it is for a fishing community to be able to work, and it's just a miracle the people of Plaquemines Parish have stayed as strong as they have."

Leonard Mistich, of the Plaquemines Association of Business and Industry commented, "We are excited that vital piece of equipment is finally on its way to Plaquemines Parish, and are very grateful to all those involved in this project to help get our fishing fleet back on the water."

Vinsel, who has chaired the fishermen's charity effort since it was formed, also represents the largest of Alaska's fishermen's professional associations, the United Fishermen of Alaska. He said, "AFIRM is all volunteer, and this truly has been an amazing effort by an amazing number of people, from fishermen and processors to bankers to truckers. For a lot of people, the hurricanes may be fading from memory, but not for those who experienced them and are still out of their homes and out of work, and not for those of us who know what that's like. These folks needed help and couldn't afford to wait for the government to get around to it. Alaska has stepped in, and that was the right thing to do."

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1) "The Travelift trek begins in snowy Valdez"



- 2) "Valdez residents showed support for their Louisiana neighbors by signing the Travelift before it left town."

Photos by Alan Sorum Courtesy of AFIRM

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