



July 22, 2026

Director Tornga
AMHS
7037 N Tongass Hwy
Ketchikan, AK 99901

Dear Director Tornga,

On behalf of the PWS Economic Development District, I am writing to comment on the proposed 2026–2027 Alaska Marine Highway System winter schedule. Our Board of Directors recognizes the significant challenges facing the Alaska Marine Highway System including maintaining an aging fleet with limited vessels and funding. Our concern is not with the need for vessel maintenance, but with how the impacts of that maintenance are distributed.

Under the proposed schedule, Prince William Sound would be without ferry service from **October 1 through March 6**, leaving our region without Alaska Marine Highway service for virtually the entire winter. This proposal once again places a disproportionate share of the statewide service reductions on a single region. Unfortunately, this is not an isolated occurrence. Prince William Sound has repeatedly experienced longer maintenance-related service interruptions than other regions of the Alaska Marine Highway System. Prince William Sound communities understand that maintenance is unavoidable, but they should not be expected to repeatedly absorb the largest share of the resulting service reductions simply because their service is provided by a single vessel.

Can the AMHS consider deploying the LeConte and/or the Tustumena for three months of service in PWS, for twice-weekly service to Whittier? Eliminating service for the villages of Chenega and Tatitlek, and for Cordova and Valdez, places an undue burden on the communities this system was designed to serve.

A service gap of this size, the entire winter, will create sizable economic impacts in Prince William Sound communities. Local businesses depend on reliable marine transportation to move inventory, equipment, vehicles, freight, and employees. The fall and winter months are especially important for PWS's growing mariculture industry, which relies on dependable transportation for seed, equipment, supplies, and workforce movement. In addition, several significant building and infrastructure projects currently underway in our communities depend on the ferry to transport construction materials, specialized equipment, contractors, and support vehicles. We are hearing that some businesses may close down during this ferry service gap, which would effectively eliminate some people's ability to earn their livelihood during winter months.

...

Reliable winter ferry service is also essential for residents. After the commercial fishing season ends, many families schedule medical appointments that have been postponed during the summer months. Residents travel for specialized healthcare, education, training, family obligations, and holiday gatherings. The Alaska Marine Highway provides an affordable transportation option for people, vehicles, and freight that cannot be fully replaced by air travel. As with any highway, prolonged closures create economic and personal hardships for the communities that depend upon it.

We also write to echo the concerns raised by the Cordova School District. Under the proposed schedule, the District estimates that replacing planned ferry travel with airfare would increase transportation costs by more than **\$80,000**, jeopardizing educational opportunities for hundreds of students. The District also notes that increased costs for lodging, baggage, freight, and vehicle rentals, combined with reduced family participation, create additional financial and social burdens. Students living in communities off Alaska's surface road system deserve equitable access to the same educational, athletic, and extracurricular opportunities as students elsewhere in the state, and dependable ferry service is essential to making that possible. We strongly support the Cordova School District's request for periodic winter service to Prince William Sound.

Looking beyond this winter's schedule, we also encourage the State to continue implementing the vision established in the **Alaska Marine Highway System 2045 Long Range Plan** by homeporting the **ACF Tazlina** in Cordova once the necessary dock improvements are complete. This recommendation was developed through the State's own long-range planning process and represents an important investment in the long-term reliability and resiliency of Prince William Sound service. We urge State leadership to remain committed to this approved plan. Homeporting the *Tazlina* in Cordova, in PWS, would improve operational flexibility, strengthen service reliability, and better position the AMHS to respond to maintenance schedules and service disruptions while providing more dependable transportation for PWS communities.

The AMHS exists to connect Alaska's coastal communities. Just as all Alaskans benefit from this statewide transportation network, the unavoidable impacts of maintaining that system should be shared across the state as well. We respectfully request that the proposed winter schedule be revised to provide supplemental service to Prince William Sound through another vessel at the beginning, end, or intermittently throughout the *Aurora's* maintenance period.

Thank you for your consideration and for your continued commitment to Alaska's marine transportation system.

Sincerely,



Kristin Smith

Executive Director

...