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News: Coast Guard Research and Development Center tests Aerostat system during Arctic exercise

U.S. Coast Guard District 17

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Story by [Petty Officer 1st Class Shawn Eggert](#)

COAST GUARD CUTTER HEALY, At Sea - Situational Awareness is an important factor of any response. The ability to monitor assets during dangerous operations or track the movements of a target can greatly influence the success of a mission. Knowing this, the Coast Guard Research and Development Center and Oil Spill Response Institute deployed an Aerostat system to serve as an extra eye in the sky during this year's mission to the Arctic.



Petty Officer 1st Class Shawn Eggert

Researchers aboard the Coast Guard Cutter Healy prepare to deploy an Aerostat system during an exercise in the Arctic Aug. 16, 2014. The Coast Guard Research and Development Center, based in New London, Conn., used the Aerostat to track a simulated spill during the exercise. (Coast Guard photo by Petty Officer 1st Class Shawn Eggert)

At first glance an Aerostat seems to be nothing more than a very large balloon, but the system is actually a self-contained, compact platform that can deploy multiple sensor payloads and other devices into the air. For this year's mission, the RDC and OSRI were primarily interested in the Aerostat's ability to record the movements and operations surrounding a simulated oil spill in icy waters.

"The Aerostat can be outfitted with different kinds of cameras depending on the mission requirements, but for this exercise we equipped the system with an electro-optical/infrared camera with automatic tracking and geo-tagging capability," said Mike Coleman, an RDC surface branch project manager aboard the Healy. "This enabled us to view continuous real-time aerial video during the 48-hour operating period of the exercise."

The Aerostat used aboard the Healy this year was capable of lifting a 40-pound payload up to 500 feet into the air using a winch-controlled launch and recovery system. A tether attached to the payload from the Healy transferred power to its cameras eliminating the need for batteries which would increase the load on the balloon. Though the system was only used for tracking a simulated oil spill in this instance, potential exists for the Aerostat to be used for a variety of other missions in the Arctic.

"Other agencies have used Aerostats for interdiction and security, but the system's versatility could allow it to be used to provide communications support or long-range search capabilities with the right payload," said Coleman. "This year, we only tested the Aerostat's ability to monitor an oil spill from the Healy, but the system allows for multiple users to view its data or even share control of its cameras if necessary. That means agencies working together as part of an ashore incident command structure can quickly view or manage the same surveillance as assets at sea."

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The Aerostat was just one of many unmanned technologies evaluated by the Coast Guard and its partners during their trip aboard the Healy. The information gathered about the system's capabilities will help researchers plan for future exercises and the future of response efforts in the Arctic.

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