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UAF research vessel under new ownership

By [Robinson Duffy](#)

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The University of Alaska Fairbanks has sold its oceangoing research vessel, the Alpha Helix.

"It sailed away from Seward last week," said Denis Wiesenburg, dean of the UAF School of Fisheries and Ocean Sciences. "It's going to have a new life."

The university sold the 133-foot vessel to Stabbert Maritime, a Seattle-based company, for \$680,000. The university was asking for a minimum bid of \$1.5 million when the vessel was put on the market in November, according to documents pertaining to the sale.

Wiesenburg said he was happy to see the vessel go to someone who could make good use of it.

"It was costing us \$16,000 a month to maintain it at the dock in Seward — keeping it serviced and keeping it insured," he said.

The Alpha Helix was built in 1966 in Tacoma, Wash., and was originally used by marine biologists researching the Great Barrier Reef, the South Pacific and the Amazon River. The vessel's hull was ice-strengthened to allow it to operate in the Bering Sea, but the vessel wasn't powerful enough to penetrate deeply into the sea ice without being escorted by an icebreaker.

UAF began operating the ship, a floating laboratory, in 1980. Researchers in Alaska have used it to sample the ocean for radioactive runoff from Russia, scanned the



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25,194-foot-deep Aleutian Trench and studied seabirds, sea otters, whales and other marine mammals. Research conducted on the vessel was used to predict the path of the oil spilled during the Exxon Valdez disaster in 1989. The vessel hasn't been used for any research since 2004.

"It wasn't that the ship wasn't still usable; it's that the science that was being done couldn't be accommodated in a vessel that size," Wiesenburg said.

The ship isn't large enough to handle some of the more sophisticated research equipment now in use, he said, and research crews have grown in recent years — the Alpha Helix only has room for 14 scientists, while many modern projects involve 20 researchers or more.


The Alpha Helix will be refitted in Seattle and put back into service as part of Stabbert Maritime's fleet of research vessels, according to a news release from the company.

UAF is hoping to replace the Alpha Helix with the proposed \$122 million Alaska Region Research Vessel, Wiesenburg said. The proposed research vessel, which the university hopes will be funded by the National Science Foundation, would be more than twice the size of the Alpha Helix and be capable of breaking through sea ice.

"It's going to be quite a vessel and it should meet the needs of the oceanographic community for 30 to 40 years," Wiesenburg said.

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