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Bit by bit, ship sets sail

SELENDANG AYU: State undecided if entire freighter will be removed.

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Welders are lopping off the cabins, cranes and smokestack of the grounded freighter Selendang Ayu and will leave nothing more than a bare steel deck nearly the size of a football field sticking out of the aquamarine water off Unalaska Island by the time they're through. The remainder of the ship, which went aground and broke in half in December, won't be touched this year, state officials say. It may be left forever.

"We haven't made a decision one way or another," said Leslie Pearson of the Alaska Department of Environmental Conservation. "State policy is total removal," but cutting up and hauling off both halves of the broken freighter could take a greater environmental toll than leaving it in place, she said.

The state wants more information about the wreck removal process, as well as advice from Unalaska residents and the agencies that manage nearby lands, Pearson said.

"We'll make a decision based on those findings," she said.

In the meantime, a vessel tracking program has begun in the Aleutians that will provide the best information yet on the number, size and type of ships passing through. Officials say the new data could help determine how best to prevent shipwrecks in the region.

More than 2,700 ships capable of creating a sizable oil spill are thought to travel through the Bering Sea every year, including oil tankers, container ships, freighters and fishing boats of various sizes, ages and conditions. As trade with China increases, the number is expected to rise, shipping officials have said.

The Selendang Ayu left Tacoma, Wash., for China in November with 60,000 metric tons of soybeans aboard. About 140 miles northwest of Unalaska, the crew shut down its massive engine for repair and then could not restart it. The ship drifted 55 hours, blown southeast by a storm, before it beached on Unalaska Island on Dec. 8.

Six of its crew died when a Coast Guard rescue helicopter attempting to pull them off the grounded ship crashed.

The vessel broke in two shortly afterward. It spilled 335,000 gallons of oil into waters managed by the Alaska Maritime National Wildlife Refuge. Thick, gooey bunker oil eventually washed up on about 70 miles of beach, though only a few areas were considered heavily oiled.

About 75 percent of the affected beaches have been cleaned. The rest should be finished this summer, Pearson said. The area will be reinspected next summer and, if necessary, cleaned again, she said.

The owners have spent more than \$80 million on the cleanup, Pearson said.

The soybeans that piled up on the bottom of Skan Bay and created knee-deep windrows in places where they drifted ashore are decomposing and will not have to be removed, Pearson said.

The front half of the ship eventually sank. All that's visible now are two cranes and the tip of the bow, according to Dan Magone, president of the Unalaska salvage company Magone **Marine Services Inc.**

"It gives the impression that it's intact," Magone said of the bow section. "It's not at all."

He was among the divers who inspected the wreck. The cranes are attached to a steel skeleton, but the rest of the bow has been broken and scattered, he said.

"The bottom is covered with big chunks of hull, and anything shallower than 40 feet has ribbon kelp on it," he said. "You can't even see the (metal) stuff because it looks like reef already."

The rear portion of the vessel, with the engine, propeller, crew quarters and wheelhouse, is in shallower water and appears to be floating. It's not, Magone said. The hull has compacted under its own weight and sits solidly on the rocky bottom, though the deck is still some 10 feet above the water at high tide.

The ship doesn't rock back and forth and won't unless a tremendous storm hits it, he added.

"If you were there when it had motion," he said, "you wouldn't want to be there."

Magone's workers have been through the ghost ship and stripped its interior. They removed everything they could, he said, including furniture, fixtures and thousands of gallons of paint, hydraulic fluid and other toxic fluids.

"I even found a Selendang Ayu life ring in the submerged side," he said. "I gave it to the admiral" of the Coast Guard in Alaska, Rear Adm. James Olson.

Last week, Magone's crew tackled the ship's exterior. Using welding torches and a huge crane, workers started cutting apart the five-story white superstructure piece by piece. Steel slabs weighing up to 20 tons will be loaded onto a barge and eventually shipped to Seattle for disposal, he said.

If the weather permits, the work might be completed by late September, said Magone, a veteran of dozens of salvage operations, including in the Aleutians, Kodiak and Cook Inlet. More realistically, it will take an extra month, he said.

One of the last tasks will be to cut apart the exhaust stack, the top of which is about 80 feet above water level. Surprisingly, Magone said, it contains water to within 20 feet of the top. Workers will have to drain it before they chop it up, he said.

The ship owners have proposed to leave the hull and deck in place, though they would have divers make strategic cuts inside the ship to encourage its quick collapse.

The state wants the vessel removed. It's technically possible, DEC's Pearson said, and the owners are insured to cover the cost, which could run into several hundred million dollars. Allowing the wreckage to remain would set a bad precedent, she said.

But removing the sunken hull has environmental drawbacks that need to be considered, Pearson said. The job could take two full summers to complete. Cutting up the ship would require enormous vessels and crews, creating the potential for even more pollution.

This winter, the state will make a final decision on what to do with the ship, she said. Removal could begin next year, along with additional beach cleanup if necessary.

The first steps toward eliminating future shipwrecks started last month. The **Marine Exchange of Alaska**, a Juneau-based nonprofit that brokers information about the maritime industry, set up equipment to monitor vessel traffic entering the Bering Sea through Unimak Pass.

Since the late 1990s, the Coast Guard has required large ships to carry transmitters that work much like the emergency radio locator beacon in every airplane. The automated identification system transmits the vessel's name, size, location and other information every six seconds.

But in Alaska, very few receivers are on line to gather the information, said Ed Page, who runs the **marine exchange**. His group installed the necessary equipment at the site of the former lighthouse on Scotch Cap.

Data from the site will provide the best information to date on vessel traffic through the great circle route to Asia, Page said. It could eventually demonstrate the need for large rescue tugs in the region.

The tracking system would not have made a difference with the Selendang Ayu, Page said. The ship drifted for 15 hours before the captain notified the Coast Guard. But the new tracking system only extends a few dozen miles.

To monitor ships farther out at sea will require the use of expensive satellite technology. The equipment exists, Page said, and is required on large ships for use as an emergency signal.

If all ships were monitored all the time, the information could be used to prevent an environmental catastrophe, he said. It could also help with national security by tracking who's coming and going in U.S. waters, he said.

"It's just a matter of time before this becomes the way we do business in the future," Page said. "It's just coming a little slow."

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