

Tankers, barge collide on Mississippi River, spilling oil

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Two tanker ships and a barge collided on the Mississippi River just outside of New Orleans, Louisiana, last week, causing 580 gallons of oil to spill into the water. A large vessel carrying grain lost power and steering at around 11 p.m. Tuesday night, August 12, and crashed into a tanker docked at a terminal on the river near Gretna, Louisiana. The docked ship contained petroleum products and had been loading at the time.

While thankfully there were no injuries, it was reported that a large hole could be seen on the side of the tanker carrying petroleum products. The US Coast Guard, Gretna Police, Jefferson Parish Emergency Management and Harvey Fire Department all arrived on the scene to respond to the accident and control damage. The grain ship remained anchored in the middle of the river for over an hour and a half, until tugboats arrived to tow it off to the side.

Gretna authorities immediately shut off the city's water supply following news of the incident. They have since issued a public statement assuring residents that the drinking water supply had not been tainted by the spill. The municipal water supply was upriver of the source of the spill, and therefore was unaffected. The New Orleans Sewerage and Water Board likewise issued a statement declaring the city's water intake had not been affected and the local water supply was safe to drink.

The grain ship, a Maltese-flagged vessel Flag Gangos, lost both power and steering near mile marker 97.4 on the Mississippi River. Unable to change course, the Flag Gangos struck Liberian-flagged vessel Passimos as well as barge Web 235, both moored at the International Matex Tank-Terminals. The Passimos had been loading No. 6 fuel oil from barge Web 235 at the time. The force of the collision caused the transfer hose

between the two ships to be ripped loose, spewing oil into the river before workers were able to shut off the flow of fuel.

Jefferson Parish City Councilman Chris Roberts reportedly posted on his official Facebook page that the smell of oil was undoubtedly in the air following the incident. It is still unknown at this point if any shipping workers or local residents have been exposed at any point to unsafe or harmful levels of oil. As of now, Gretna and New Orleans officials have taken no precautionary measures aimed at keeping residents safe from exposure.

Officials temporarily evacuated anyone on the river in the immediate area around the spill to 3rd Street, around a third of a mile from the bank. The Coast Guard stated that they have applied boom to the area and have contained the "majority" of the spill in the Mississippi River, which feeds into the Gulf of Mexico. They temporarily shut down regular traffic across the river, allowing only one-way travel. At around 2 p.m. Wednesday, they lifted all travel restrictions. An investigation has begun into the incident, focused on what caused the Flag Gangos to lose power.

This is the third major shipping accident this year that has resulted in the spilling of oil in the Gulf Coast area. In February of this year, a tanker barge and a towboat collided, dumping 27,552 gallons of oil along a 65-mile stretch of the Mississippi River. The collision forced the Coast Guard to shut down traffic throughout the stretch of the river for two days, delaying 29 vessels.

Just one month later, two days before the 25th anniversary of the Exxon Valdez oil spill, a collision involving an oil barge off the coast of Texas released up to 168,000 gallons of thick fuel oil near ecologically fragile wetlands. The spill occurred just south of the Port of Houston in Galveston Bay, in a heavily used

shipping channel linking the port to the Gulf of Mexico. The accident resulted in the delay of over 100 ships.

Two workers were reportedly sent to the hospital after inhaling toxic gas released by that spill. Authorities responded by closing the channel, siphoning off as much oil as possible, deploying two dozen skimming vessels, and laying over 90,000 feet of floating boom to contain the spill. Tide, current, and wind conditions, however, made containment effectively impossible, and oil began washing up on nearby shores.

There are, of course, countless other shipping accidents occurring on a regular basis that are underreported or not reported at all. Just after midnight August 13, a captain of a tugboat was killed by a falling crane on the Industrial Canal in New Orleans. The captain, Michael Collins, had approached the Florida Ave. Bridge on the canal and asked that the bridge be raised so he could pass. At the time, the tugboat had been pushing a barge carrying a large crane.

According to a New Orleans spokesperson, the bridge was raised higher than the level Collins had asked. As the barge passed through, the crane hit the bridge, causing it to fall on the steering cabin of the tugboat. Initial responders from the New Orleans Fire Department removed the crane and pronounced Collins dead on the scene. The bridge was inspected and reopened to normal traffic at 4:30 a.m.



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