

Following bridge collapse

Federal officials target end of May for full reopening of Port of Baltimore after bridge collapse

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Close to three weeks after a container ship crashed into the Francis Scott Key Bridge outside the Port of Baltimore, collapsing the bridge and sending six workers to their deaths, cleanup and salvage operations continue to clear the shipping channel. The US Army Corps of Engineers (USACE) has released a tentative timeline for reopening the channel, aiming to restore partial shipping operations by the end of this month and fully reopening by the end of May.

Thousands of tons of collapsed bridge and road materials need to be cleared in order for large ships to be able to reach parts of the port further upstream in the Patapsco River. Currently, the Tradepoint Atlantic terminal in nearby Sparrows Point is the only part of the port that remains operational and accessible to ships.

Meanwhile, the bodies of three workers, who plunged to their deaths in the morning of March 26 when the MV *Dali* container vessel struck the southern support pillar of the bridge, remain missing. Three bodies—those of 26-year-old Dorlian Castillo Cabrera, 35-year-old Alejandro Hernandez Fuentes, and 38-year-old Maynor Yasir Suazo-Sandoval—have been recovered. Two workers who fell into the river that night survived the ordeal.

USACE has three main priorities: clearing the federal shipping channel, refloating and removing the *Dali* and clearing the rest of the wreckage at the bottom of the river.

Crews have been cutting pieces of the steel truss sitting in the northern portion of the shipping channel into pieces they can be lifted by crane onto ships and hauled away to Tradepoint Atlantic. The aim is to create a “Limited Access Channel” allowing one boat at a time to move through.

This limited shipping channel will be 35 feet (10.7 meters) deep and 280 feet (85.3 meters) wide. Normally, the federal shipping channel there is 700 feet (213.3 meters) wide and 50 feet (15.2 meters) deep.

The Unified Command of the Army Corps and the US

Coast Guard, working with the state of Maryland, are targeting the creation of a temporary shipping lane in a northern portion of the channel because the *Dali* is stuck on the edge of the southern portion. Refloating and removing the ship will pose a massive challenge.

First, there are at least 4,000 tons of the former bridge sitting on top of the *Dali*, crushing its bow and pushing it into the muddy silt at the bottom of the Patapsco. On top of that, the ship is extensively damaged. Pictures of its bow show it has been partly scraped off by the falling bridge. The ship has also suffered partial flooding.

Furthermore, a high-pressure gas pipeline runs beneath the vessel in the channel sediment. The *Dali* cannot simply be dragged from its location due to this pipeline and due to the fact that its bow could rip off under the weight of the bridge sections on top of it.

After the bridge pieces are removed from the ship, the plan is to refloat the *Dali* and get it unstuck from the mud at the bottom of the channel. To facilitate this, crews have been removing containers from the deck, which each weigh several tons and have contents that have shifted from the bridge collision.

The initial 35-foot depth of the Limited Access Channel will allow for some ships to move in and out of the harbor, specifically barges and roll on/roll off (RO/RO) vessels that carry automobiles, trucks and farm equipment.

When ships are not using this channel, dredging operations will work gradually to restore the limited channel to its former depth of 50 feet. Only after the *Dali* has been removed can the clearing of the remaining wreckage in the full shipping channel be completed.

Sonar images released by the Army Corps earlier this month showed a scramble of tens of thousands of tons of the former bridge, including the concrete and asphalt that made up its roadbed and the steel that formed the truss span,

sitting at the bottom of the channel.

Dive teams in these waters face extremely dangerous and uncertain conditions. An Army Corps *Facebook* post from April 2 said visibility is “clouded to just one to two feet because of the four to five feet of mud and loose bottom of the Patapsco River.” Divers must “work in virtual darkness, because when lit, their view is similar to a heavy snowfall at night with high-beam headlights on.”

“So murky is the water,” the post continued, “divers must be guided via detailed verbal directions from operators in vessels topside who are viewing real-time CODA imagery.” On the Army Corps’ Baltimore district website, emergency management specialist Rick Benoit said working underwater amid the wreckage field “is like cleaning the site of 9/11 with blinders on.”

Divers could impale themselves on exposed steel or rebar or even be hit by falling pieces of concrete shifting from the bridge above them. The water is cold, and divers risk getting stuck in the mud at the bottom. There is also the current to consider, which can shift the wreckage.

USACE Commanding General Scott Spellmon said, “A fully opened federal channel remains our primary goal, and we will carry out this work with care and precision, with safety as our chief priority.” The April and May timelines are “ambitious,” Spellmon said, “and may still be impacted by significant adverse weather conditions or changes in the complexity of the wreckage.” Recovery of the missing three workers will form some part of this effort, Spellmon hinted, but he did not say more about the search for their bodies.

While federal officials, including President Biden, who visited Baltimore earlier this month, have expressed optimism over the reopening of the port, some experts are skeptical of the timeline.

Sal Mercogliano is a maritime historian at Campbell University and former merchant mariner whose *YouTube* channel, “What Is Going on with Shipping,” explores topics in the sector. He said in a recent video, “They’re talking about, on their timeline, the end of April being able to bring those 35-foot draft vessels through the Limited Access Channel. That’s very optimistic. It depends on whether or not they get the weather to do that.”

Mercogliano continued, “Then they’re talking about bringing deep draft vessels in by the end of May, but the complete channel clearing is going to be after May. It’s going to take longer than that. And all of that is absolutely dependent on weather and abysmal diving conditions in and around the port. It is black water diving. You can’t see, and you’re limited in removing wreckage by the size of the cranes you have.”

The shipping channel in the Port of Baltimore was 50-feet deep even before the New Panamax ships came into

operation in the last decade with the expansion of the Panama Canal because it has long been a point of import and export for heavy bulk carriers loaded with coal, salt, and sugar, which need a deeper draft.

Mercogliano doubted whether the dredging operations will be complete in the limited channel by the end of May. “You may be able to bring in some smaller [vessels],” he said, “but not the big vessels like *Dali* that draw over 40 feet of water.”

For the ruling class, the bridge collapse is primarily an economic event. Their concern has been the reopening of the Port of Baltimore as quickly as possible, rather than focusing on how to prevent similar disasters and hold the profit-driven companies responsible for the disaster to account for their actions.

The Port of Baltimore shipped over 750,000 automobiles last year and is geographically the closest port on the East Coast to markets in the Midwest. Port activities account for some 20,000 jobs in Maryland and support an additional 50,000 jobs indirectly. The Maryland Port Administration estimates the port’s closure has an economic impact of \$190 million per day.

About 8,000 port workers remain furloughed and have not been paid in weeks since the bridge collapsed. These same workers diligently showed up during the early days of the COVID-19 pandemic to ensure store shelves remained stocked with essential items.

Meanwhile, Amazon workers and others at Tradepoint Atlantic have expressed concern over the impact of the port disruptions on companies in the area.

As the bridge cleanup continues, on Friday in Pittsburgh the West End Bridge was shut down after 26 barges lost their mooring on the Ohio River and drifted.



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