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Boat carrying diesel fuel sinks off Wrangell

Author: Devin Kelly Updated: September 28, 2016 Published January 16, 2014

A steel-hulled boat carrying thousands of gallons of diesel fuel sank off the coast near Wrangell on Tuesday, casting a rainbow sheen several miles across the water, the Coast Guard said.

The Silver Bay II, a 60-foot former tugboat now used as a private recreational craft, sank at its moorings in about 120 feet of water at the Wrangell Silver Bay sawmill along Zimovia Strait, officials said. An estimated 3,500 gallons of diesel fuel was onboard at the time.

Silver Bay employees discovered the sunken vessel while checking the dock and boats at 3 p.m. on Tuesday, according to a Coast Guard situation report. The tugboat apparently drifted under a deck barge when it sank.

The logging company alerted the Coast Guard to the sinking about 4 p.m. on Wednesday, said Chief Petty Officer Sara Mooers, a Coast Guard spokeswoman. By then, Silver Bay had already set up a floating barrier and contracted with a Ketchikan-based diving and salvage company to cap off fuel tanks, she said.

However, heavy rainfall and wind speeds of between 17 to 28 miles per hour were delaying diving efforts and slowing salvage company access.

What caused the boat to sink and how much oil has been spilled was still unknown, Mooers said. A small amount of oil was reported to be seeping from the boat Thursday.

"Our primary concern is the safety of the responders and addressing any pollution from this vessel," Mooers said.

Alaska's Department of Environmental Conservation was among the authorities working on a plan to contain pollution related to the incident. The agency recommends against harvesting shellfish in areas where oil or oil sheens can be seen or smelled.

The Coast Guard said there had been no reports of impacts to wildlife or "subsistence resources" related to the spill.

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