

Grounded freighter refloats self overnight; reef investigation continues



Hard aground A 623-foot freighter ran aground on a reef about 8:30 a.m. on Wednesday about one mile off of Port Everglades, the U.S. Coast Guard reported. The Norwegian ship Spar Orion hit a large reef outside the port's anchorage and remains stuck, said Petty Officer James Judge, spokesman for the Coast Guard. The freighter is carrying 44,000 metric tons of cement from Sweden, Judge said. *(Sun-Sentinel/ Lou Toman)*

By Robert Nolin
South Florida Sun-Sentinel

May 18, 2006, 9:24 AM EDT

BULLETIN: The Coast Guard said the Swedish freighter that grounded itself about a mile off Port Everglades on Wednesday refloated itself during tidal changes overnight and was freed completely by 1:30 a.m. The Spar Orion is now in anchorage off the port with no reports of damage. The ship is expected into port to unload its cement cargo on May 22. The Coast Guard and other agencies continue to investigate to determine if reefs in the area where the vessel grounded were damaged. A dive survey of the sea floor by state and federal agencies is scheduled for today to determine the extent of any damaged caused by the grounding. There were no injuries or pollution reported in conjunction with the grounding.

Student divers piloting their research vessel noticed the freighter just off Fort Lauderdale beach Wednesday morning. They immediately knew the 623-foot Norwegian ship was too close to shore. It was also too close to the fragile reef they had come to inspect.

The Spar Orion, and the 48,000 pounds of powdered cement it carried, was hard aground.

"It's almost a certainty that it crunched the reef," said Richard Dodge, dean of the Oceanographic Center at Nova Southeastern University in Davie, where the student researchers studied. "The degree that it crunched it is unclear."

The freighter, which draws 37 feet of water, had hit bottom and stuck fast about a mile

offshore between Sunrise and Las Olas boulevards. It was on its way to Port Everglades from Sweden and should have been in one of the deepwater anchorages to the east, where beach visitors often see cargo ships waiting to enter port or embark for other destinations.

The vessel did not appear to be damaged after the grounding, which occurred about 9 a.m. "The ship's not taking on water. No one was injured," said Coast Guard spokesman Ryan Doss.

Scientists and environmentalists fear damage to the offshore reef, the innermost of three that parallel the coastline. The Spar Orion was the 11th large vessel to run aground off Port Everglades since 1994. "This will be the fourth or fifth in just the past two years," said David Gilliam, an NSU research scientist.

Each time, the reef, consisting of hard and soft coral, suffers sometimes irreparable damage, experts say. Vessel owners can be ordered to pay to reattach coral, remove rubble and set rocks back in place. "Millions have been spent in restoration efforts," said Ken Banks, manager of the marine resources program for Broward County's Environmental Protection Department.

Wednesday's sea was calm which may limit reef damage from a big boat. "It's not rocking back and forth as they sometimes do, which is fortunate," Dodge said. Tugboats tried to pull the vessel off the bottom when high tide hit around noon, but after a couple of hours of effort, the ship and its 22-member crew remained stuck. "It's in a little bit harder than they thought," port spokeswoman Ellen Kennedy said.

The freighter's owner, Spar Shipholding of Norway, must now hire a salvage company to draft a plan for refloating the vessel. The Coast Guard must approve that plan before refloating efforts can continue, Doss said.

Tides are crucial to loosening grounded ships, Doss added, and the next high tide was to occur about 1 this morning. Doss couldn't say how the vessel grounded. "That's all going to be part of the investigation," he said, adding that the Spar Orion wasn't under the command of a harbor pilot at the time, though that wouldn't be required until a boat heads into port.

There has been some concern recently among Coast Guard officials that the deep-water anchorages may have shifted.

Coast Guard and county environmental dive crews will assess any reef damage today.

Shipowners or their insurers typically hire consultants to work with the county on reef repair, Banks said.

"They can do a certain level of restoration, but they can't bring it back to life," he said.

Robert Nolin can be reached at rnolin@sun-sentinel.com or 954-356-4525.

Copyright (c) 2006, South Florida Sun-Sentinel
