

Grounded ship off Fort Lauderdale beach may have damaged reef

by David Fleshler

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Afloat again

The 546-foot freighter Federal Pescadores sits off Fort Lauderdale beach about 3 blocks south of East Las Olas Boulevard. The Coast Guard pulled the ship into deeper water on Sunday evening, and now divers are preparing to assess damage to the reef.

(Sun-Sentinel/Susan Stocker; Oct. 12, 2004)

Tugboats pulled the grounded freighter Federal Pescadores into deeper water Sunday evening, clearing the way for divers to go in today to look for damage to coral reefs.

The 546-foot ship ran aground off Fort Lauderdale late Wednesday night after leaving Port Everglades with a load of cement bound for Port Canaveral. The Coast Guard is investigating the accident.

Over the weekend, work crews pumped out fuel to lighten the Panamanian-flagged ship. Several tugboats hauled it east, allowing it to float for the first time in four days. There were no injuries, no damage to the ship and no discharge of fuel oil or other pollutants, according to the Coast Guard.

But the ship ran aground among reefs that have sustained repeated strikes from freighters and other

ships calling on the port or using the anchorages off Fort Lauderdale.

The Coast Guard has said that the ship didn't damage the coral reef. "It wasn't on the reef, it was on sandy bottom," Petty Officer Gretchen Eddy said Monday. "There was no damage."

But outside experts say it appears the ship did hit the reef, according to the coordinates released by the Coast Guard.

Ken Banks, manager of marine resources programs for Broward County, said, "We plotted the coordinates that the Coast Guard provided, and it shows that it's up against the edge of the reef. It seems very likely that it's impacting some reef. Also the reef tends to be shallower than the sand bottom, and that probably indicates that there's reef damage, too."

"It looks like there's reef in the area," said Richard Dodge, executive director of the National Coral Reef Institute of Nova Southeastern University. He said the reef might have been covered by sand churned up by the ship's propellers, making it appear the ship hit only sand.

Since 1998, five other major groundings have taken place on the reefs north of Port Everglades. In March the Eastwind, a Greek-flagged ship carrying bauxite and oil, ran aground on the second reef off shore and destroyed thousands of square feet of coral, sponges and other marine life.

"This whole region of south Fort Lauderdale beach has seen several groundings since the mid-90s," Banks said. "There's a lot of shipping traffic coming in and out of Port Everglades, and there are those anchorages."

When ships damage the reefs, the owners generally must pay fines and the costs of any repairs, such as reattaching pieces of coral that are still alive. Typically their insurance companies pay these costs. The Federal Pescadores' representative at its insurance company, PNI Club, could not be reached.

As popular places for fishing, snorkeling and diving, the South Florida reefs are crucial to the region's tourist industry.

Environmentalists and Fort Lauderdale city commissioners have called on the Coast Guard to move or restrict the anchorages to better protect the reefs. But Coast Guard officials have said there's no need to move them and that altering the anchorages would be a cumbersome process that would require the approval of the city, the Army Corps of Engineers and other agencies.

The repeated groundings have generated concern among scientists and environmentalists. The reefs already face threats from pollution, beach widening, port dredging and other projects. Coral reefs can take decades to recover from groundings, if they recover at all.

"Reefs recover very slowly from this type of physical damage," Dodge said. "Whether it recovers or not depends on how many insults it gets. It's a pretty stressed environment from ship groundings."

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Grounded freighter leveled hunk of coral reef off Fort Lauderdale

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Photo by Jamie Monty
FSU Oceanographic Center, National Coral Reef Institute

Divers found extensive damage Tuesday to a coral reef at the site of last week's grounding of the freighter Federal Pescadores off Fort Lauderdale, with thousands of square feet of reef "bulldozed over and flattened."

In the first examination of the site since the ship was refloated on Sunday, divers from Broward County's environmental department and Nova Southeastern University found coral smashed to rubble and barrel sponges sheared off at the base. They found sea fans snapped in two and buried in sand. The damage extended over an area running at least the 546-foot length of the ship, with a width of as much as 200 feet.

"It's flattened smooth, smoother than some parking lots," said Brian Ettinger, research associate with Nova's National Coral Reef Institute. "There's an extensive amount of damage done to the reef."

The ship ran aground late Wednesday night after leaving Port Everglades with a load of cement bound for Port Canaveral. Tugboats pulled it free Sunday. The Coast Guard is investigating the accident.

Supporting a rich variety of fish, crustaceans and other marine life, coral reefs are considered a vital part of the ocean environment. The reefs off southeast Florida, the only ones in the continental United States, play a big role in the tourist industry, drawing many thousands of people a year to fish, dive and snorkel.

Just six months ago, the freighter Eastwind ran aground slightly north on the same reef, grinding up a comparable amount of coral. At the time, Fort Lauderdale Mayor Jim Naugle called for the Coast Guard to consider moving two anchorages that had been the source of several ships that ended up on the reefs.

Naugle said Tuesday that he would bring up the issue at next week's meeting of the City Commission. If no steps are taken, he said, the reefs face constant danger from the growing shipping business at Port Everglades.

"This is relatively new from the explosive growth they've had," Naugle said. "It's something that does have a negative impact on tourism and the environment."

The port has taken no position on whether to move the anchorages, which were established by the Coast Guard, said Ellen Kennedy, spokeswoman for Port Everglades, which is run by the Broward County Commission. She said the port has "a vested interest in protecting the community's environment as well as providing a safe and convenient anchorage for our customers."

Moving the anchorages would be a lengthy process that would involve consulting with the port, the port's pilots, the maritime industry and the Army Corps of Engineers, said Lt. Tony Russell, spokesman for the Coast Guard. It would

be difficult to move them too far out to sea because ships have a more difficult time anchoring in deeper water, he said.

"We do have to find that balance between effective, efficient, safe commerce and protecting the environment," he said.

The Broward County Department of Planning and Environmental Protection is working on a formal damage assessment as the prelude to enforcement action against the ship's owner, said Kent Edwards, a county environmental manager who dove on the site Tuesday.

In grounding cases, the county and state Department of Environmental Protection usually impose fines and require payment for restoration work. Such work could involve reattaching broken corals and placing limestone modules around the reefs to provide habitat for sponges, corals, crustaceans, fish and other creatures that make their homes in reefs.

Larry Cohen, attorney for PNI Club, the owner's insurance company, said his company is conducting a careful scientific analysis and will cooperate with authorities in any work to repair or mitigate the damage.

"This is a responsible owner," he said. "We're here. We're conducting a responsible investigation, and we'll take responsible steps to make sure the state and Broward County are satisfied."

He declined to identify the ship's owner. Lt. Russell said Coast Guard records list the owner or operator as Dong Lien Maritime.

No one knows whether the reef will recover, particularly if it continues to get hit. Coral grows very slowly, sometimes as little as a centimeter a year.

"You're talking hundreds and hundreds of years it took to develop the reef," said Ettinger, of the National Coral Reef Institute. "And now it's gone in a day."

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