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10 years after New Carissa, threat of new spill remains

By Brian Harrah, The Oregonian
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Doug Beghtel/The Oregonian/1999

Pushed ashore by a fierce winter storm, the 639-foot cargo ship New Carissa lies grounded north of the Coos Bay port entrance on Feb. 4, 1999. The salvage attempt, oil spill and wreckage removal that followed would play out for nearly 10 years.

It was the ship that wouldn't go away, or even die. Despite the efforts of international salvors and, in time, 58 agencies and groups, the grounded New Carissa broke in two after being firebombed, drifted ashore after being lost at sea, spilled 70,000 gallons of fuel oil along Oregon's fragile coast, killed more than 3,000 birds, cost tens of millions to clean up and spawned several lawsuits.

The saga began in a wave-torn ocean 10 years ago this morning, and much since was supposed to change. Yet the same maritime calamity could happen today.

Worse, it could be a ship loaded with cargo or yet more polluting substances.
The New Carissa defied best intentions and derring-do tactics. When it was towed to sea, it broke free of a towline flown in from Holland -- and then headed to Waldport. Towed to sea again, it withstood plastic explosives and 69 rounds from a Navy destroyer before a $1 million torpedo from a nuclear attack submarine sunk it -- and that was just the 440-foot bow section. The stern was still mired in the sand in Coos Bay, where it would stay until this past September and require Florida-based salvors to conduct industrial removal operations at the beach.

"In other words, a Murphy's law was in operation," said Jean Cameron, director of an oil spill task force that coordinates preparedness among the Pacific Coast states and British Columbia.

Even the legal fight was dirty. At one point, an expert hired by the ship's owners claimed it was too dangerous to move the stern. The state finally sued the owners for negligent trespassing and in a Coos Bay courtroom won a $25 million judgment -- later settled at $22 million -- to pay for the cleanup.

Former Gov. John Kitzhaber on Tuesday said it remains the only time he's been in a courtroom. But he said unspoiled beaches are part of Oregon's heritage and that was worth fighting for.

"This ship ends up on our beach, and we have to expend all legal remedies to get those people to take it off," he said.

Emergency coordinators believe the state is somewhat better prepared now to handle a maritime oil spill, but preventing one is another story.

At every twist, a turn

The New Carissa approached the Oregon coast on the night of Feb. 3, 1999, intending to pick up 37,000 tons of wood chips at Coos Bay. Built in Japan 10 years earlier, flagged in Panama and staffed by a Filipino captain and crew, the ship was a typical commercial visitor. Otherwise empty, the ship carried 359,000 gallons of heavy bunker fuel oil in six tanks and 37,400 gallons of diesel in

More than 2,000 bulk cargo ships and barges annually ply the Columbia River system alone, and in the past seven years at least seven have run aground or lost propulsion while in the river or just off the coast of Oregon or Washington. There hasn't been a spill like the New Carissa, but that may have been because of luck.

And the next spill, a governor's review committee notes, could come from a ruptured pipeline, a train wreck, a tank truck accident or a fuel storage facility. "We need to be prepared," the committee said.

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The salvaging drama at the beach was led by a Portlander, Bill Milwee, who was routinely maddened by the ship.

The first time Milwee saw the New Carissa, it was turning broadside to the surf off an isolated beach north of the Coos Bay harbor entrance. It was grounded in soft sand, its 639-foot length exposed to heaving, battering seas and a punishing wind.

"Oh ...," Milwee began, and the expletive that followed would become part of the New Carissa's lexicon for nearly a decade.

Milwee, then 62 and an independent salvor who'd worked on more than 150 shipwrecks worldwide, had taken a call at home from one of the ship's insurers, who wanted him on the scene. Bearded, gruff and with a chin-first approach to problems, Milwee was a former naval officer who had written the book on the subject, a 777-page tome called "Modern Marine Salvage."

Arriving at Coos Bay that first day, Milwee surveyed the wreck from a helicopter.

He was alarmed by wild weather and the lonely spot at which the ship had come ashore.

"It was wintertime in Oregon, and that's not the best place to work at sea or on the coast," he recalled this week.

A widely circulated story has Milwee brashly announcing, "We have no fear, we'll get it out of here." Milwee said he may have uttered something similar, perhaps with another expletive, but he was not overconfident.

"Let's say 'hopeful,'" he said. "I wasn't going home the next day, I knew that. It wasn't going to be easy; it had a lot of bad factors."

But things flew out of hand, almost daily. A spreading salvage disaster became an environmental problem -- leaking oil -- of unknown dimension. Already dangerous work continued by klieg lights at night. Rare equipment parts to aid the effort were flown in from around the world -- to no avail.

Yet the governor's review committee found nothing "horribly wrong" with the state and federal response. Milwee, a decade later, agreed.

"Things dictated themselves," he said. "You make the best decision you can, and sometimes it works and sometimes it doesn't."

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Against the fear that there could be a next time, the governor's committee offered a series of recommendations to reduce risk and improve planning, coordination and communication.

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A storm was battering the coast, with winds up to 45 mph and 26-foot seas. A Coos Bay pilot, assigned to guide the ship into port, advised against entering the bay. The ship's captain, Benjamin Morgado, dropped anchor north of the harbor entrance, about a mile and a half offshore, intending to wait things out. Investigators later concluded this was a glaring error.

Here's what happened, in equal parts comedy, tragedy and frustration:

Feb. 4, 1999: High seas and strong winds cause the anchor to drag and push the ship into the surf zone. It runs aground about 8:30 a.m., about three miles north of Coos Bay.

Feb. 4: Unable to free the ship with its engines, officials ask for a powerful salvage tug. The closest, the Salvage Chief, is in Astoria but hasn't been fired up for a year.

Feb. 7: The Salvage Chief, bottled up in port by the same storm, finally gets under way.

Feb. 8: The New Carissa begins to leak oil; tar balls wash up on beach.

Feb. 9: The Salvage Chief gets in position but can't reach the New Carissa with its tow gear.

Most pertinent, nautical charts used by ship captains no longer indicate it is safe to anchor in the spot where the New Carissa was. The principal defense used by the ship's captain, Benjamin Morgado, was that he was acting on the information available to him -- that is, his maps. While the Coast Guard faulted Morgado for anchoring too close in a storm, it found no basis for criminal prosecution.

Other recommendations have languished. Among them:

Have a powerful salvage tug on standby. An Astoria-based tug that might have been able to pull the New Carissa off the beach hadn't been in service for more than a year, and it took 18 hours to get it ready. Then the same storm bottled it up in port for two days. By the time the tug arrived, the New Carissa was too far ashore for the tug's tow gear to reach.

A tug is stationed at the entrance to the Strait of Juan de Fuca to rescue vessels in the Seattle area, but it's an expensive system supported by the state. Milwee said there's been talk of assigning a tug for Columbia River traffic.

"I think people would be hard-pressed to come up with money to support it, and then you've only got the Columbia covered," he said. "If you toddle off to Coos Bay, then the Columbia's uncovered."

Improve communication between port pilots and vessel masters. The Coos Bay pilot assigned to guide the New Carissa to port did not advise against anchoring offshore. The captain did not ask for advice.

Train more state employees in spill response. "It just hasn't happened," said Mike Zollitsch, an emergency manager with the Oregon Department of Environmental Quality.

If a New Carissa wrecked on the coast today?

"It would be very difficult to respond to that," Zollitsch said. Oregon is better prepared but doesn't have much experience handling oil spills, he said.

Cameron, of the Pacific oil spill task force, believes Oregon's capability is better than in 1999.

"Things are improving slowly, but it's all a political process," she said.

And the next spill, she said, "might have aspects that are different or simply out of your control."

Milwee believes the incident command structure should be streamlined. Too many responders, he said, focus on narrow aspects of an incident.

"You can't go out there and solve part of the problem," he said.

The next spill, he said, will be different.

"You're never going to eliminate stupidity," Milwee said. "Usually, these things happen because someone makes a mistake, and mistakes are going to happen until people become perfect."

Feb. 10: Structural failure floods the New Carissa's engine room, making it inoperable. Fearing a massive spill if the ship breaks up, officials decide to burn the onboard oil. The first attempt by a U.S. Navy explosives team fails.

Feb. 11: Using explosives and napalm, the Navy team ignites the fuel. Three hours after the first explosions, the vessel breaks in two. The fire burns for 33 hours and consumes about 200,000 gallons of fuel.

Feb. 17-March 1: A Seattle-based salvage tug, Sea Victory, pulls the 440-foot bow section off the beach and heads out to sea, where the bow will be sunk.

March 2: A special towline, flown in from Holland, snaps during another fierce storm about 40 miles offshore. The bow section, still containing about 130,000 gallons of oil, is blown toward land.

March 3: It runs aground at Waldport, north of Coos Bay, and begins leaking oil.

March 8: The Sea Victory retrieves the bow section and heads about 320 miles offshore to rendezvous with the USS David R. Ray, a Navy destroyer.

March 11: Naval team sets off plastic explosives to begin flooding the New

Milwee said someone once asked him if he would have done anything differently with the New Carissa.

"My answer was yes, I wouldn't have answered the phone."

-- *Eric Mortenson;* **ericmortenson@news.oregonian.com**

Carissa's bow, then fires 69 rounds from a 5-inch deck gun into its hull at the waterline. But the New Carissa won't go down. With night coming on, a nuclear attack submarine, the USS Bremerton, sinks it with a Mark-48 torpedo. The bow goes down in about 11,000 feet of water that is cold enough to solidify the thick oil.

October 1999: A Coast Guard inquiry faults Morgado for anchoring off the coast during the storm but finds no basis for criminal prosecution of him or his crew. Coastal navigation maps in use at the time did not warn against anchoring in such conditions.

October 1999: Workers cut away about a third of the stern section; the rest remains mired in the sand at Coos Bay.

November 2002: In a 10-2 verdict, a Coos County jury finds the New Carissa's owners guilty of negligent trespassing and awards the state $25 million in damages for removing the stern. The ship's owners appeal.

May 2006: A settlement leaves the state with about $22 million for cleanup and other costs.

September 2008: Working from barges and using massive cranes and hydraulic pullers, workers with Titan Maritime, a

salvage contractor, complete a three-month job of cutting and removing the stern in pieces.

-- *Eric Mortenson*