

Grounding of Kulluk sounds alarm about vulnerability of B.C. coast

Posted by Joan Russow

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DRILLING RIG

by MARK HUME

VANCOUVER — The Globe and Mail

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The Kulluk, carrying 136,240 gallons of diesel fuel and 10,242 gallons of lubes and oils, was grounded on Sitkalidak Island, near two salmon streams.

Battered by high winds and heavy seas, an offshore drilling rig that drifted aground in Alaska has raised questions about the safety of marine transportation on the West Coast.

Environmentalists say they are alarmed by the incident, which a response team of more than 600 people was still trying to contain Wednesday, several days after the Kulluk got cut loose by

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tugs during a storm.

The massive drilling rig, owned by Royal Dutch Shell, was under tow when it was abandoned for safety reasons. The crew of 18 aboard was taken off by a U.S. Coast Guard helicopter on Saturday and the rig drifted aground Monday.

Ty Keltner, a spokesman for the Alaska Department of Environmental Conservation, said there were no reports of a fuel spill, but equipment and staff had been staged to take action if needed. He said the Kulluk, which is carrying 136,240 gallons of diesel fuel and 10,242 gallons of lubes and oils, was grounded on Sitkalidak Island, near two salmon streams.

“We may be booming them off or taking whatever means are necessary to protect them,” said Mr. Keltner, who said there are also concerns about the potential impact of a spill on sea birds and mammals.

He said his department was waiting for more reports from a unified command post, which has been trying to put an assessment crew on the rig, before deciding what action to take.

The accident comes just as a federal Joint Review Panel conducting a review of the proposed Enbridge Northern Gateway project in British Columbia begins a series of hearings in Victoria and Vancouver. If the Enbridge project goes ahead, more large tankers carrying oil, under tow by tugs in inside waters, would begin plying the north coast of B.C., which is similar to the area in the Gulf of Alaska where the Kulluk ran into trouble.

Ian McAllister, a director with Pacific Wild, said the inability of Alaska authorities to bring the situation quickly under control is a reminder of how vulnerable B.C. would be if a large oil tanker went adrift. “I can’t imagine it’s that different to have a drill rig of that size, or a very large crude carrier fully laden, in storm conditions,” he said. “It is similar in terms of trying to secure it and what the aftermath might be.”

Mr. McAllister said it is troubling that even with all the resources Alaska has on hand, the government was struggling to contain the situation. “Alaska has evolved in tug

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capacity and whatnot in their long history of shipping oil through there,” he said. **“Arguably we wouldn’t see the kind of resources that they were able to put towards that drill rig. It would probably take 40 or 50 years for British Columbia to get [a response capacity] like that. It is a poignant reminder of what we could experience here.”**

Lois Epstein, Arctic program director for the Wilderness Society in Anchorage, Alaska, said it is disturbing that the drill rig was lost despite the presence of two tugs. “We have a saying up here that nature always wins in Alaska, and this is an example of that,” she said.

Colleen Keane of Pacific Environment said the accident underscores the risks of offshore oil development in the Arctic.

Shell, however, noted the accident was related to transportation, not to any drilling activity. In a statement, the company said a review has begun into the “sequence of events” that led to the grounding.

Jeff Peterson, who runs a hunting and fishing lodge in Old Harbour, the nearest village to the accident site, said local people are watching events unfold with concern.

“Best-case scenario is it just holds together and a salvage takes place,” he said. **“Worse case is it busts open and the incoming tide will suck fuel into the Ocean Bay estuary.”**