Coast Guard Says Barge Leaked 7,000 Gallons of Oil

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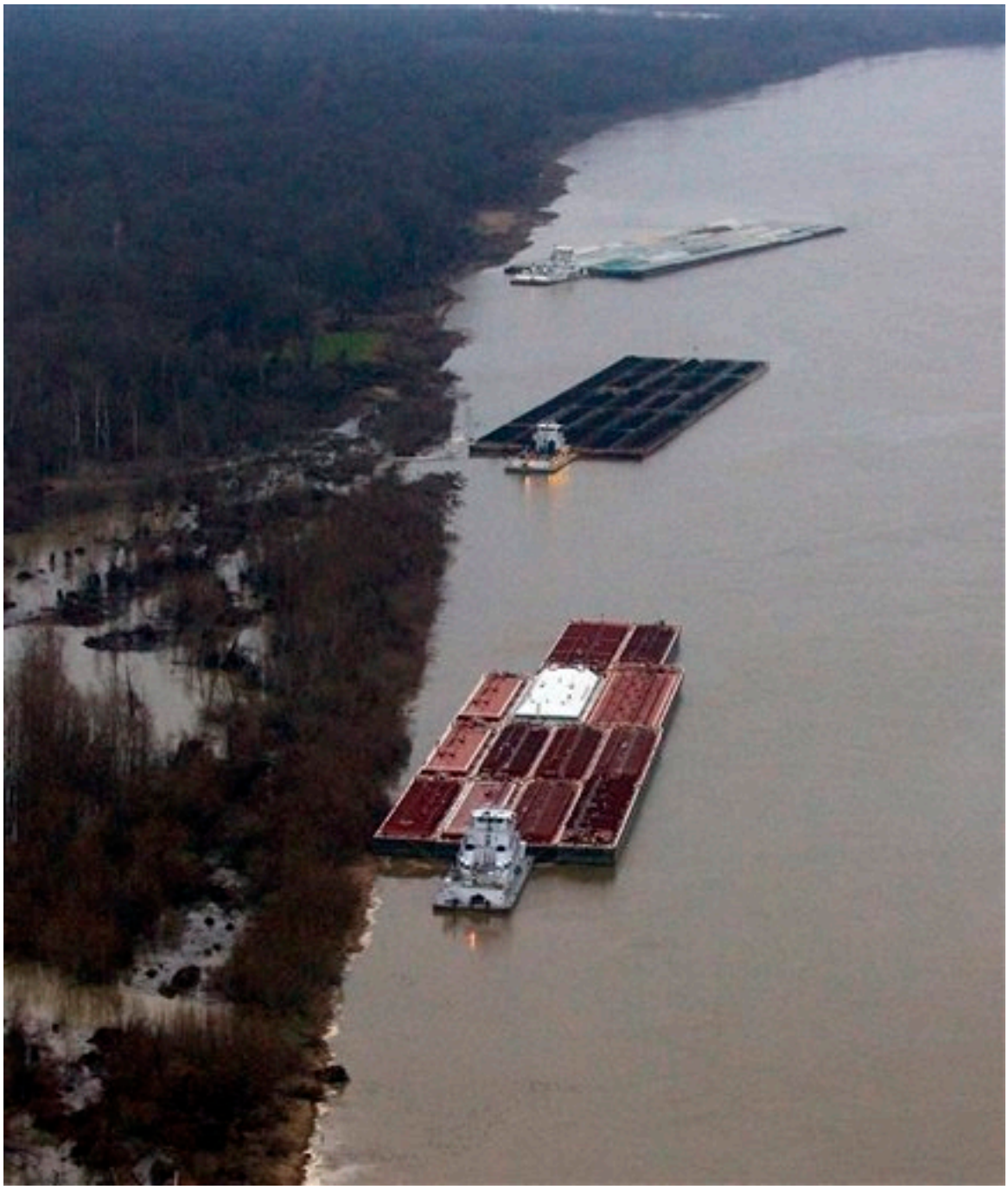

VICKSBURG, Miss. (AP) — With more than 50 vessels idled on the water for a fourth day Wednesday, authorities said they still do not know when they will be able to reopen a 16-mile stretch of the Mississippi River that has been closed due to an oil spill.

A plan to pump oil from a leaking barge onto another barge — a process known as

lightering — had been approved but it was unclear how long that would take, Coast Guard Petty Officer 3rd Class Jonathan Lally said Tuesday. He said the other barge was en route.

Severe weather that was expected to sweep through the area could shut down cleanup operations for a time, prolonging the process further, authorities said.

Crews have been working around the clock to contain and remove oil since the barge, owned by Corpus Christi, Texas-based Third Coast Towing LLC, struck a railroad bridge and began leaking early Sunday. The company has refused to comment on the incident.

Lally also noted that about 7,000 gallons of crude oil were unaccounted for aboard the barge. He said it's not clear if all of it spilled into the river or if some seeped into empty spaces inside the barge.

At least 54 vessels, including towboats and barges, were idled on the river, one of the nation's vital commerce routes.

"The Coast Guard advised our hazardous materials unit that the river would be closed indefinitely to all traffic," Lt. Julie Lewis of the Louisiana State Police said Tuesday.

About 168.4 million tons of cargo a year move along the Mississippi River between Baton Rouge, La., and the mouth of the Ohio River, carried by nearly 22,300 cargo ships and 162,700 barges, according to the Army Corps of Engineers. About 3.6 million tons of cargo is handled annually by the port of Vicksburg.

When low water threatened to close the river earlier this month, the tow industry

trade group American Waterways Operators estimated that 7.2 million tons of commodities worth $2.8 billion might be sidelined over the last three weeks of January.

Salt destined for Northern roads is moving upriver in January, said spokeswoman Ann McCulloch. "We're still moving corn, soybeans and grain, but also coal and petroleum ... stone, sand and gravel," she said Tuesday.

Barges carry 20 percent of the nation's coal and more than 60 percent of its grain exports, according to the group.

Ron Zornes, director of corporate operations for Canal Barge Co. of New Orleans, said each idled towboat could cost a company anywhere from $10,000 to $100,000 a day. The low end would be for a single boat with a couple of barges and the high end for one in "a system of towboats that acts sort of like a bus system."

"So if one bus is stopped it gums up the whole system," he said.

On the other hand, vessel traffic tends to be less in January than during peak harvest season, when grain from the U.S. heartland is shipped south to be loaded onto massive ships near New Orleans.

On Tuesday, tugs were pinning the ruptured barge to the bank on the Louisiana side of the river, across from Vicksburg's Riverwalk and Lady Luck casinos. Their engines churned the muddy water. A few workers could be seen walking on top of the stricken barge.

An orange boom bobbed in the water just downstream and another boom was set up as a second line of defense to contain leaking oil.

Environmental impact, Lally said, has been minimal because a boom is containing the leak around the barge and the leak is slow.

Lally said crews had skimmed 1,596 gallons of an oil-and-water mixture from the river. He said there was no evidence that oil was washing ashore.

Nature's Way Marine LLC of Theodore, Ala., has been named the responsible party for the oil spill, a designation that is assigned under the federal Oil Pollution Act.

The barges were being pushed by the company's tug Nature's Way Endeavor. The company has declined requests for information from The Associated Press.

Companies found responsible for oil spills face civil penalties tied to the amount of

oil that spilled into the environment. Lally said it's too early in the investigation to know whether the company could face penalties or fines.

The Nature's Way Endeavor was pushing two tank barges when the collision with the bridge happened about 1:30 a.m. Sunday, authorities said. Both barges were damaged, but only one leaked. Authorities declared the bridge safe after an inspection.

The leaking tank, which was pierced above the water line, was carrying 80,000 gallons of light crude, authorities said. The Coast Guard hasn't said how much oil was in the other tanks on the barge.

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Mohr reported from Vicksburg. Janet McConnaughey reported from New Orleans.

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