

## New Audio From Houston Channel Oil Spill

Associated Press

TEXAS CITY, Texas (AP) — The captains of the two vessels that collided in the Houston Ship Channel were aware they were perilously close to one another but still failed to avert a spill that dumped 168,000 gallons of oil into the water, according to a U.S. Coast Guard audio recording.

The recording, obtained by the Houston Chronicle (<http://bit.ly/1ommtpw> [1] ) in a Freedom of Information Act request, indicates the captains spoke in a frantic radio exchange beginning about five minutes before the March 22 collision. But the exchange apparently came too late for the captains to avoid making contact in the crowded waterway, trafficked daily by massive, oceangoing container ships.

"If you keep on going, I'm going to get you," the captain of the bulk carrier, the larger of the two vessels, says in the recording, released Monday. "Captain, I can cut her back. I can go dead slow, but that still ain't going to stop it because I'm coming up on half a mile of you," he added.

The captain of the smaller vessel, which was towing two barges carrying nearly a million gallons of marine oil, responded to the warning by attempting to back out of the channel at full speed.

With less than a mile of visibility because of heavy fog, and as the vessel towing the oil-laden barges backed up, the smaller ship's captain radioed the approaching carrier, saying, "I'm looking at you now and it don't look good."

Moments later, one of the barges was sideswiped by the larger vessel, resulting in a puncture that sent a stream of dense, sticky oil into Galveston Bay. It then spread into the Gulf of Mexico and southward along the Texas coast.

The collision near Texas City closed one of the nation's busiest seaports for several days, stranding some 100 vessels.

Coast Guard Petty Officer Andy Kendrick said that cleanup continued Tuesday and that animals affected by the oil are being treated in rehabilitation centers.

As many as 21 dolphins, four sea turtles and 168 birds have died as a result of the oil spill, Kendrick said.

About 220 miles southeast of the site of the collision, Padre Island National Seashore education coordinator Buzz Botts said that 3 percent of the sand on the northern part of Padre Island was contaminated and hundreds of seabirds are covered with at least small amounts of oil.

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"A lot of the effects to wildlife at this point are hard to gauge," Botts said.

Investigators are still trying to identify the cause of the accident, but Texas law considers the company carrying the oil, Houston-based Kirby Inland Marine Corp., a responsible party, Greg Pollock, deputy director for the Texas General Land Office's oil spill response division, told The Associated Press.

The other ship was a Liberian-flagged vessel owned by a Greek shipping company, the Chronicle reported.

A report from the U.S. Office of Inspector General said in May 2013 that the Coast Guard didn't have adequate processes to investigate marine accidents or take corrective actions. A lack of dedicated resources, the report said, had resulted in a backlog of 6,000 investigations.

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