

Russian Cargo Ship Carrying Tons of Fuel Towed Away From Canadian Coast

October 19, 2014

The  Moscow Times

PRINCE RUPERT, British Columbia — A large tugboat has begun pulling a disabled Russian cargo ship along British Columbia's coast, ending fears that the vessel carrying hundreds of tons of fuel would drift ashore, hit rocks and spill.

Lt. Paul Pendergast of the Canadian Forces' Joint Rescue Coordination Center said the Barbara Foss tugboat arrived Saturday evening and the tow of the Simushir was going well.

Pendergast said authorities will wait until the Simushir is comfortably north of Haida Gwaii before they make a decision on where it will be towed. Prince Rupert is the nearest container ship port, 93 nautical miles away.

The Simushir lost power late Thursday off Haida Gwaii, also known as the Queen Charlotte Islands, as it made its way from Everett in Washington state to Russia.

The Coast Guard ship Gordon Reid earlier towed the disabled ship away from shore, but a towline got detached and the ship was adrift again for six hours Saturday.

The 10 crew members were trying to repair the broken oil heater that has left the vessel disabled, Royal Canadian Navy Lt. Greg Menzies said.

The fear of oil spills is especially acute in British Columbia, where residents remember the Exxon Valdez disaster of 1989, in which the tanker spilled 35,000 metric tons of oil.

About 5,000 people live on the islands and fish for food nearby, Haida Nation President Pete Lantin said.

The Simushir, which is about 440 feet (135 meters) long, was carrying a range of hydrocarbons, mining materials and other related chemicals. That included 400 tons of bunker oil and 50 tons of diesel.

A spokesman for Russian shipping firm SESCO, the owners of the vessel, said it is carrying 298 containers of mining equipment in addition to heavy bunker fuel as well as diesel oil for the voyage.

The U.S. Coast Guard had a helicopter on standby in the event that the crew members need to be pulled off the ship. Officials said the injured captain was evacuated by helicopter, but they were given no further medical details.

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