Tug Towing Barge of Frozen Fish Aground

Thursday, 15 November 2012

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The 78-foot tug Polar Wind and its 250-foot barge sit aground 20 miles east of Cold Bay, Alaska, Nov. 14, 2012. The five crew members of the Polar Wind were rescued by Air Station Kodiak Coast Guard helicopter crews and safely transferred to Cold Bay. U.S. Coast Guard photo by Petty Officer 2nd Class Benjamin Stixrud

Alexandra Gutierrez/KUCB

Five crewmembers from the tug Polar Wind were rescued after it and the barge it was towing went aground.

The Northland Services tug was 20 miles from Cold Bay when it became separated from the barge. According to the Coast Guard, the crew lost control of the two vessels while they were trying to reconnect the towline. Petty Officer David Mosley says that weather was a factor.

The Coast Guard received a distress call at around 9 p.m. on Tuesday, and sent out two helicopters to respond to the situation. Mosley says that the rescue was made five hours later, and had to be completed in two rounds.

"The first helicopter that got on scene was one of our smaller helicopters that are based off our patrol cutters in the area. And so, it was able -- by leaving its rescue swimmer behind -- take three out of the five crew members. So, they got the first folks out, and then as they were going back toward Cold Bay the second helicopter was able to come in and retrieve our rescue swimmer as well as the remaining two crew members."

The Coast Guard has not released the identities of the five people rescued.

With the crew of the Polar Wind safe, the Coast Guard and the Department of Environmental Conservation are now working to reduce the impact to Alaska’s coastline. The tug and barge were carrying more than 23,000 gallons of diesel fuel at the time of the grounding along with smaller amounts of lube oil and other petroleum-based products. The barge was also carrying 90 refrigerated containers, and 30 of them were full of frozen fish.

A Coast Guard flyover conducted yesterday afternoon showed that the vessels were still upright, and that there wasn’t an oil sheen in the area.

Steven Russell with the Alaska Department of Conservation says they will continue to monitor the situation closely since the tug and barge are still in a vulnerable position.

"They’re pretty exposed to the southeast at that location, and there’s a couple of sensitive areas around there with sea otters and sea lions."

While there isn’t a hard timeline for getting the vessels off the rocks, contractors have already been hired to salvage the vessels and minimize the potential for pollution.