

Crew Assesses Inside of Kulluk Rig

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A salvage team aboard the conical drilling unit Kulluk moves an emergency towing system delivered the Kulluk by a Coast Guard MH-60 Jayhawk helicopter Wednesday, Jan. 2, 2013. The Kulluk is located 40 miles southwest of Kodiak City, Alaska, on the shore of Sitkalidak Island. U.S. Coast Guard photo by Petty Officer 1st Class Travis Marsh

Jay Barrett/KMXT

A five-person assessment team spent about three hours aboard the grounded Shell drilling rig Kulluk yesterday (Wednesday) afternoon. Weather conditions around Sitkalidak Island improved enough that a Coast Guard helicopter was able to lower the men and an emergency towing package by hoist to the deck of the rig.

Shell's Alaska Venture Operations Manager Shawn Churchfield said the preliminary report from the crew showed a mostly intact interior.

"The salvage team was able to get to some areas below the decks. They were time limited, so they did not do the full assessment. They were able to check into some of the voids and some of the tanks. They looked into the fuel," he said. "The full report and the full assessment is being worked at the moment. Most of the tanks were mostly intact, but they did see one that was sucking and blowing a little bit one of the void spaces."

That would indicate a breach into the void, or empty, space where wave action was causing air to rush in and out. There was no indication it was a fuel tank.

Steve Russell of the Alaska Department of Environmental Conservation was on an overflight of the rig on Wednesday afternoon.

"The Kulluk was drawing approximately 30 feet of water when it went aground, so it is in a deeper water there," he said. "The beach behind the Kulluk I would say is a large cobble beach, with mixed sand and gravel. In that area there's not huge rocks, at least that were visible, on the beach."

He said on the overflight that no fuel spill was spotted and the only wildlife seen was a few birds:

"We did not observe on our flight anyway, any wildlife in that area at all," he said. "And then approximately one mile, one-and-a-half north of the platform we got pretty close to the beach to try and

identify anything that would give us a sign of any environmental impact, whether that was debris from the platform, as the captain has spoken (of). We did see the lifeboats there. We did not see any other debris that we could identify back to the rig.”

Russell said the lifeboats from the Kulluk gave him a good idea of currents in the area, and where any potential pollution might travel.

Captain Paul Mahler, the federal on-scene coordinator, said it was too early to speculate on a time frame for getting the Kulluk off the beach OR even how that might be accomplished.

The Unified Command yesterday named Smit Salvage as the company that will attempt to free the Kulluk. Smit worked on the salvage of the Selendang Ayu (sell’en-dang eye-u) on Unalaska Island in 2004, and assisted in the Costa Concordia cruise ship salvage off the coast of Italy last year.

A second evaluation team will be landed on the Kulluk today, weather permitting.

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