

M-150 ME-4

NATIONAL TRANSPORTATION SAFETY BOARD  
WASHINGTON, D.C.

ISSUED: April 22, 1981

Forwarded to:  
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SAFETY RECOMMENDATION(S)

M-81-30

About 0430 on August 21, 1980, the United States tankship S/S TEXACO NORTH DAKOTA collided with Eugene Island 361-A, a partially constructed artificial island used in oil production operations, located in the Gulf of Mexico about 100 nautical miles south of Morgan City, Louisiana. The TEXACO NORTH DAKOTA was partially loaded with several petroleum products, one of which was unblended gasoline. The vessel struck the island head on and the vessel's forward cargo tanks were ruptured, resulting in a fire that destroyed the forward part of the cargo tank area and the midships house. The fire burned for several days before it was extinguished by a professional firefighting team. The crew abandoned the vessel without any loss of life. The salvaged vessel was later surveyed and declared a constructive total loss. 1/

The private aids section of the Aids to Navigation Branch, Eighth Coast Guard District, received a telephone message on July 1, 1980, from Chevron U.S.A., Inc., that work was to begin on an artificial island in Eugene Island Block 361 on July 2, 1980. A confirming letter to the Coast Guard from Chevron was mailed the same day. The following day, a written application requesting approval to establish and maintain private aids to navigation (nav-aids) was submitted to the Coast Guard for approval. On July 14, 1980, the application was approved and returned to Chevron with a letter of instruction that notification be made to the private aids section of the Aids to Navigation Branch, Eighth Coast Guard District, when the nav-aids were in operation. This notification "is essential for the Coast Guard to make timely notice to mariners." 2/

On July 21, 1980, a contractor completed its work on the partially constructed structure and left the location with its construction equipment after establishing some nav-aids. Two additional nav-aids were placed in operation on July 24, 1980. On July 30, 1980, Eighth Coast Guard District Local Notice to Mariners No. 32-80 was compiled, and under the section titled "Structures and Aids Established, Changed, or Discontinued" appeared the following: "Chevron 192-3 in position 28-07-04 N, 91-39-25 W has been established displaying four quick flashing white lights. Sign: CH-EI-361-A. Chart: 11340." The printed local notice was delivered to the U.S. Postal Service on Friday, August 1, 1980, for distribution through the regular mail.

1/ For more detailed information read "Marine Accident Report—TEXACO NORTH DAKOTA Collision with Artificial Island EI-361-A, Explosion and Fire, Gulf of Mexico, August 21, 1980" (NTSB-MAR-81-4).

2/ Letter from Chief, Private Aids Section, Eighth Coast Guard District, to Chevron dated July 14, 1980.

Both the Local Notices to Mariners and Weekly Notices to Mariners contain navigational information for correcting nautical charts and publications and both are issued weekly. Changes affecting the charts and publications for the area of the Gulf of Mexico where the accident occurred usually first appear in the Local Notices to Mariners issued under the authority of the Commander, Eighth Coast Guard District, New Orleans. Local Notices to Mariners can be broadcast and/or printed. Items for a Local Notice to Mariners are received until noon Tuesday, are then assembled and typed, and are delivered to the printshop on Wednesday afternoon. Emergency items can be included if delivered to the marine information section before noon Wednesday. The Local Notice to Mariners is then printed, collated, addressed, and delivered to the Eighth Coast Guard District's mailroom before noon Friday for delivery to the U.S. Postal Service. This notice contains information that can be expected to appear in a Weekly Notice to Mariners about a month later.

The Weekly Notices to Mariners (NM) are published by the U.S. Defense Mapping Agency's Hydrographic/Topographic Center at its Brookmount, Maryland, headquarters. Information on the nav-aids established on EI-361-A was published in NM 35-80, dated August 30, 1980, as a correction to National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration chart No. 11340. "Each [Weekly] Notice to Mariners is compiled and printed in the brief span of a Friday night and Saturday morning, but despite the breakneck speed of printing and the frequency of publication, the Notice is often not as timely as it is meant to be. For instance, information about the installation of an offshore mobile drilling unit or rearrangement of buoys may take almost a month to be published in a notice after the information has been received and evaluated at the agency's headquarters." 3/

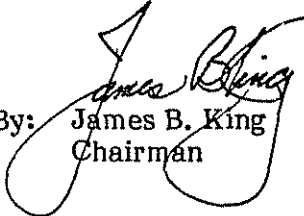
The investigation revealed that neither Texaco's marine department at Port Arthur, Texas, the TEXACO NORTH DAKOTA, nor the master or any of the deck officers on the vessel were on the Eighth Coast Guard District's mailing list for Local Notices to Mariners. However, even if they had been, it is doubtful that the notice concerning the presence of EI-361-A would have been delivered to the vessel by the time it sailed from Port Neches, Texas, about 15 miles from Port Arthur, on August 4, 1980. Masters of vessels that frequently transit the area of offshore structures should pay particular attention to the Local Notices to Mariners for more timely information. Texaco did not arrange to have the master or his representative secure all the latest information available for the anticipated voyage prior to sailing. The duties of officers regarding marine information, as stated in 46 CFR 97.05-1, require that licensed deck officers acquaint themselves with the latest information published by the Coast Guard and the U.S. Navy regarding aids to navigation. The master and licensed deck officers aboard the TEXACO NORTH DAKOTA apparently acquainted themselves with this information only if it arrived onboard with the regular mail.

Therefore, the National Transportation Safety Board recommends that the Defense Mapping Agency:

Include in the regularly published Weekly Notices to Mariners a cautionary note to those mariners who frequently transit the area of offshore structures to consult the Local Notices to Mariners for the most current information on structures and aids established, changed, or discontinued. (Class II, Priority Action) (M-81-30)

3/ August 1980 edition of the "Surveyor," published quarterly by the American Bureau of Shipping.

KING, Chairman, and McADAMS and GOLDMAN, Members, concurred in this recommendation. DRIVER, Vice Chairman, and BURSLEY, Member, did not participate.

  
By: James B. King  
Chairman