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Tanker's West Coast trip shows need for new rules, environmentalists say

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WASHINGTON -- The Coast Guard and current laws allowed the sister ship of the Exxon Valdez to carry its cargo of crude up the California coast after its anchor had poked a hole in its hull last month.

Now environmentalists and one local lawmaker are calling for new standards that would prevent such a damaged ship from leaving port.

The tanker Long Beach left the Port of Long Beach Dec. 21, 2002, after divers secured a steel patch over a 22-inch-by-10-inch football-shaped hole on its underside. Coast Guard inspectors approved the temporary fix and let it sail to San Francisco to drop off the remaining crude oil onboard. It continued to Port Angeles, Wash., for permanent repairs that were finished Dec. 28.

On its way, the Long Beach passed through or near four National Marine Sanctuaries, including the Channel Islands.

Before the ship left Southern California, SeaRiver Maritime Inc., the Houston-based company that ships oil for Exxon Mobil Corp., ordered the vessel's oil tanks closest to the hole to be emptied "as a precautionary measure," said Fran McClain, assistant chief of the inspection department for the Coast Guard's Marine Safety Office in Los Angeles/Long Beach.

McClain said the Coast Guard's Safety Office briefly considered making the Long Beach stay in Southern California, but the anchor had poked a hole near the front of the ship, where only seawater is stored for ballast.

"There was thought about that, but because of where the damage was and the way the temporary repairs were, it was not believed to be a show-stopping factor," he said. "And the fact that they already unloaded much of their cargo off (at the Port of Long Beach) also was a variable."

While the Coast Guard and SeaRiver did not break any laws or regulations by allowing the Long Beach to sail, critics are saying the laws should be examined as a result.

"The fact that the Coast Guard had reservations about letting it leave the port and SeaRiver was worried enough to empty the tanks closest to the hole

adds up to a potentially dangerous situation," said Richard Charter, marine conservation advocate at Environmental Defense's Oakland office.

"If this is the normal protocol -- if this is OK by anyone's standards -- then maybe we need to look at changing the standards," he said.

He said he suggests that national marine sanctuaries require the Coast Guard or shipping companies to notify them if a damaged ship is passing through.

Rep. Lois Capps, D-Santa Barbara, said Congress should consider stricter standards so ships and tankers in the Long Beach's situation wouldn't be able to leave port. She said she plans to contact the Senate and House transportation committees about that.

"Think of what would happen if this ship would have come apart and all the contents had been discharged out in our channel, for example, then made their way up the coast," she said. "I think it's terribly worrisome."

McClain, of the Coast Guard, called SeaRiver "a reliable company." The Coast Guard even gave SeaRiver its highest environmental excellence award last year.

Built by SeaRiver in 1987, the Long Beach is the sister ship to the Exxon Valdez, whose captain ran it aground in 1989, spilling more than 11 million gallons of crude oil into Prince William Sound, Alaska.

In May 2000, the Long Beach had its own problems in Alaska. As it was pulling way from the Port of Valdez, aerial surveillance found a slick of less than 10 gallons had leaked from a 3-inch crack in the hull.

The ship was repaired and returned to service in three days.

In the latest incident, the tanker was outside the Port of Long Beach when strong currents swept the anchor into the hull. It caught on a device that stuck out from the bottom of the hull, ripping it open.

SeaRiver notified the Coast Guard, as required. Inspectors determined that it did not puncture any oil tanks.

Coast Guard officials then allowed the Long Beach to sail to Port Angeles to undergo permanent repairs even though the ports at Long Beach and San Francisco both had repair facilities.

SeaRiver spokesman Ray Botto said the tanker Long Beach is too large to fit in any dry dock north of San Diego, and SeaRiver determined the waters in

Port Angeles are calmer in winter than in the Port of Long Beach or San Francisco Bay.

The California Office of Spill Prevention and Response regularly tests coastal waters for oil spills and has not found any linked to the Long Beach, OSPR spokeswoman Dana Michaels said.

"(The section with the hole) is not part of the cargo block in any way shape or form," said Botto. "The only thing that would affect was seawater needed for ballast."

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