

2019's Worst Offenses Against GEORGIA'S WATER

ST. SIMONS SOUND & GEORGIA'S COAST

Cargo Ship Disaster Fouls St. Simons Coast

INTRODUCTION:

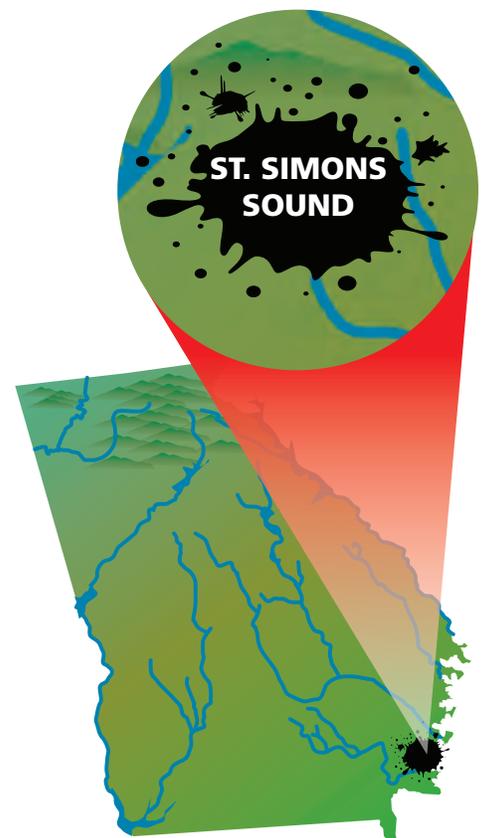
In the early hours of Sept. 8, the Golden Ray cargo ship loaded with some 4,000 cars ran aground and rolled on its side in St. Simons Sound. Twenty crew members were quickly rescued by the U.S. Coast Guard, but for the next 40 hours the world watched as workers cut holes in the hull of the ship to rescue four trapped sailors. Over the next several weeks, however, an environmental crisis ensued as four types of petroleum-based fuel contained in the 655-foot-long vessel slowly leaked into St. Simons Sound. During the aftermath, the U.S. Coast Guard and private contractors for the owner of the wrecked vessel, South Korean-based Hyundai Glovis, failed to properly implement federal disaster protocol, leading to the oiling of some 30 miles of coastal marshes and beaches.

THE WATER BODY:

Georgia's 100-mile coast is a desirable destination and place to live. Home to some 650,000 residents, it hosts an estimated 15 million visitors annually, bound for the state's beautiful beaches and historic cities. These natural amenities support 24,000 tourism and fisheries jobs for Georgia citizens. Likewise, the ports at Brunswick and Savannah support more than 430,000 full and part time jobs statewide. Wildlife also flocks to the Georgia coast. Federally-endangered North Atlantic right whales use Georgia's coastal waters as their birthing suite each winter, while threatened sea turtles clamber up the state's beaches to lay eggs during the spring and summer. Meanwhile from the sky, millions of migratory birds, seabirds and shorebirds refuel and refuge in the area's nearly 400,000 acres of salt marsh, 14 barrier islands and 100 miles of coastline. Recognized as a globally significant ecosystem, Georgia's coast is one of the state's signature landscapes.

THE DIRT:

After the initial drama of the Golden Ray disaster and rescue of the trapped crew, authorities informed the public that the vessel's stores of oil were secure and posed no threat to surrounding water and wildlife, but soon that assessment proved premature.





In the weeks following the wreck, petroleum leaked from the vessel as the St. Simons Sound Incident Response Team, consisting of the U.S. Coast Guard, Georgia Department of Natural Resources and private contractors worked to contain the spill.

That containment was guided by emergency response protocol that was developed for the Georgia coast in the aftermath of the catastrophic 1989 Exxon Valdez oil spill in Alaska. That incident prompted Congress to adopt laws mandating that federal agencies develop detailed emergency response plans to mitigate oil spills.

In this emergency, however, the U.S. Coast Guard's detailed action plan for containing oil was not implemented until weeks after the spill and even then, it was not properly implemented.

For example, to capture oil moving into the coastal area with high tides, the plan called for the installation of oil containment booms and oil skimming boats at multiple locations identified as environmentally sensitive areas, including the major creeks and rivers surrounding St. Simons Sound. Because of delayed placement and improper positioning, the booms didn't contain the pollution. Oil residue caked on marsh grass and tar balls washed up on beaches.

Crews began pumping oil from the ship in late September and by Oct. 20 had removed more than 250,000 gallons. During the response, dozens of vessels and hundreds of workers were involved in mitigating the damage and salvaging the ship, but for many coastal residents the effort seemed too little and too late. Outfitters, commercial fishermen, hoteliers and others whose livelihood depends on access to a healthy ocean lost bookings and work days as a result. They continue to wait anxiously for information from the tight-lipped St. Simons Sound Incident Response Team about the extent of the spill and timeline for cleanup.

Today, the ship remains in the sound, and plans call for the cargo and the massive vessel to be dismantled and hauled away in pieces. The cause of the wreck is under investigation.

WHAT MUST BE DONE:

Mitigation of future oil spills from the vessel and restoration of damage wrought by the disaster on marshes, beaches and wildlife must continue, and the effort must be completely transparent so that coastal stakeholders understand how these ongoing efforts will affect treasured coastal resources. State officials must request a Natural Resource Damage Assessment be conducted by the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration. That assessment will determine the extent of the damage and best restoration plans. Responsible parties must be held accountable.



Top: Oil issues forth from the Golden Ray cargo ship into St. Simons Sound. As a result of the spill, outfitters, commercial fishermen, hoteliers and others whose livelihood depends on access to a healthy ocean lost bookings and work days. Above: Oil from the wrecked Golden Ray cargo ship polluted some 30 miles of coastal marshes and beaches.



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