INTRODUCTION:
Since capsizing in September of last year, the Golden Ray cargo ship has lain on its side half-submerged in St. Simons Sound, with its cargo of some 4,000 cars and tens of thousands of gallons of fuel still threatening the sound, surrounding marshes and popular beaches and fisheries on St. Simons and Jekyll Islands. COVID-19, the hurricane season and legal battles over the appropriate methods for salvaging the 656-foot vessel have delayed its removal. With the arrival of a massive cutting device and crane last month, salvage operations are poised to begin, but the method approved by the U.S. Coast Guard has come under criticism. The massive boat will be cut into eight sections, with each cut expected to spill up to 100 cars into St. Simons Sound and potentially even more fuel and oil. While steps have been taken to contain and recover debris, oil and other pollutants released during the salvage, the extent of long-term impacts to the sound remain unknown. And, without a full assessment of the damage, Hyundai, the South Korean owner of the Golden Ray, could be let off the hook for any environmental damage resulting from the wreck and salvage operation.

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:
The Golden Ray disaster in St. Simons Sound might ultimately become the most costly marine disaster in U.S. history, but the impacts of the initial oil spill and additional harm brought about by the controversial salvage plan currently underway still have not been fully evaluated.

The lack of a complete assessment of this harm leaves Georgians with few options to hold Golden Ray's owner, Hyundai, accountable for the disaster that spread oil over 30 miles of shoreline last September. Marine salvage experts have warned that the chosen salvage plan could do even more harm than last year's oil spill.

That plan involves cutting the car carrier into eight massive sections and hauling it away on barges. During the cuts, contractors have said they expect fires, and as many as 800 of the 4,200 cars on board could spill into the sound. They also expect a portion of the 45,000 to 60,000 gallons of fuel still on the Golden Ray to be released. A mesh barrier surrounding the wreckage has been put in place to contain such spills.

The company first assigned this task has claimed there's a better way. Donjon-SMIT, the marine salvagers that originally responded to the disaster, filed a lawsuit after the Coast Guard gave the salvage contract to T & T Salvage, a Texas-based company that has never conducted a marine salvage of this nature.

Donjon-SMIT has conducted two car carrier salvages, and based on those experiences, had proposed dismantling the ship in smaller sections and removing the cars individually to minimize impacts to the sound.

Donjon-SMIT's lawsuit failed, but it did cast considerable doubt on T & T's ability to effectively remove the sunken vessel while protecting the environment.

Meanwhile, environmental assessments to determine how the sound and surrounding marshes and barrier islands have been impacted by the disaster have been inadequate.

The Coast Guard or Georgia's Department of Natural Resources could assure local residents by requesting that the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) conduct a Natural Resources Damage Assessment (NRDA) of St. Simons Sound. An NRDA would determine what impacts have occurred and then recommend appropriate restoration projects and compensation to the public for losses associated with the disaster.

Those expenses would be paid by the ship's owner, Hyundai. To date, however, neither the Coast Guard or the state has made such a request.

WHAT MUST BE DONE:
The U.S. Coast Guard or Georgia's Department of Natural Resources should request and secure a NRDA.
If the federal and state agencies fail to act, citizens should demand it, and Gov. Brian Kemp and Georgia's congressional delegation should secure such assessments. Hyundai should be held accountable for all damage to St. Simons Sound and the surrounding area.

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