

2021's Worst Offenses Against GEORGIA'S WATER

ST. SIMONS SOUND

Golden Ray Shipwreck is Gone, But Extent of Damage Must Be Assessed

INTRODUCTION:

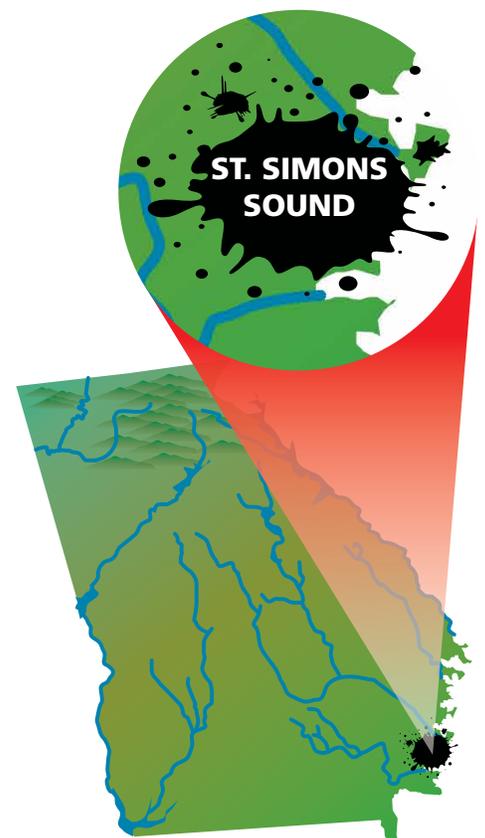
In October, the last chunk of 656-foot long Golden Ray cargo ship that capsized in September 2019 was removed from St. Simons Sound. The cost of the salvage operation, considered the largest wreck removal in U.S. history, approached \$1 billion. For more than a year, a massive 25-story, 10,000-ton floating crane, associated equipment and crew labored to cut the massive vessel into eight sections and methodically haul those sections away for salvage along with more than 4000 automobiles that the ship carried. In total, the project involved some three million man hours. While the visible signs of the wreck are now gone, the long-term impacts of more than two years of oil leaks, fires and ship debris crashing into St. Simons Sound remains unknown. While leaders of the salvage operation have claimed that "beaches and marshes are probably as clean as they have been in many years," coastal advocates have called for a more thorough assessment of the shipwreck's impacts and want to see the ship's owner, Hyundai, held accountable for damage done to the sound and surrounding coastline.

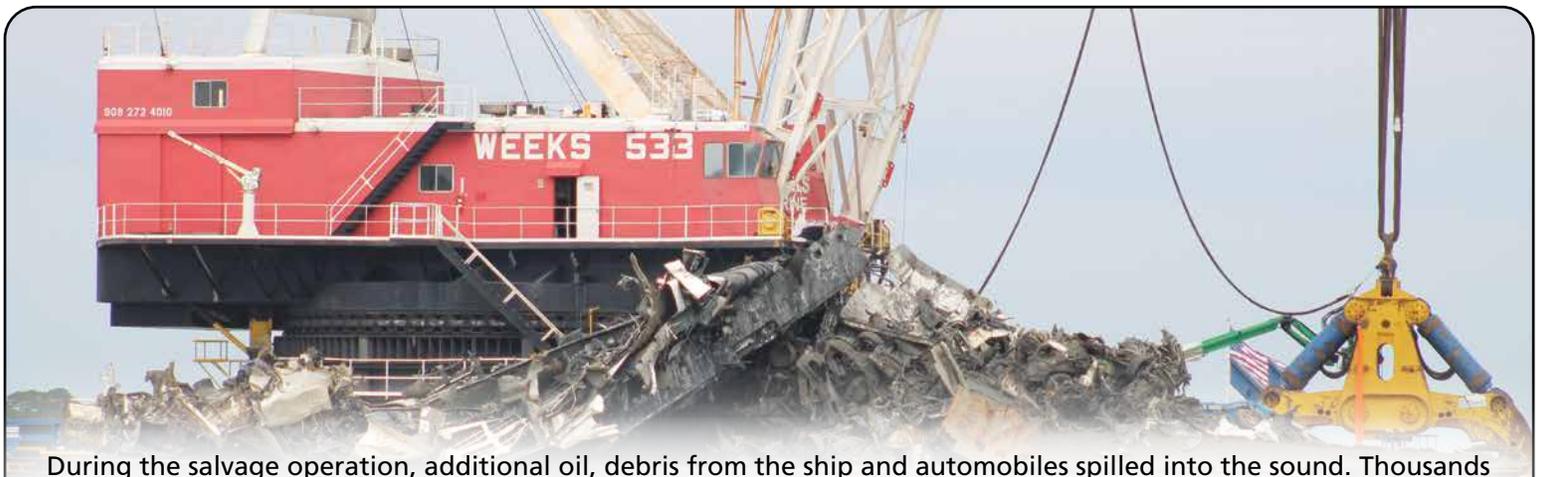
THE WATER BODY:

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:

In the initial aftermath of the September 2019 wreck of the Golden Ray, petroleum from the ship laying on its side in St. Simons Sound leaked into the water ultimately fouling some 30 miles of shoreline.





During the salvage operation, additional oil, debris from the ship and automobiles spilled into the sound. Thousands of gallons of oil were released, hundreds of birds were oiled and more shoreline was impacted. Oil has since been documented more than 10 miles from the wreck site.

Salvage operators erred in constructing an environmental protection barrier—a floating barrier around the wreck to prevent the escape of debris and pollutants—that worked only at water speeds up to one knot. The currents rushing through St. Simons Sound routinely exceed four knots. Oil and other debris were regularly documented along the shore during salvage operations.

Responsibility for the boat's removal and environmental response plans fell to Unified Command, a federally-mandated partnership between Gallagher Marine Systems (the salvage company hired by Hyundai) the U.S. Coast Guard and Georgia's Department of Natural Resources.

In addition to managing the removal of the wreck, Unified Command is responsible for assessing the wreck's environmental impacts and conducting mitigation where necessary.

Unified Command has claimed that water samples collected from the sound "confirm no long-term impacts," but observers with the coastal conservation groups Altamaha Riverkeeper and One Hundred Miles have said, not so fast.

"The goals of Unified Command to insure a timely and environmentally sound cleanup have been set aside in favor of Hyundai's wishes," said Altamaha Riverkeeper Fletcher Sams.



Top: Debris from the Golden Ray awaits removal. During the year-long salvage, oil and debris were repeatedly released into St. Simons Sound. Coastal advocates have called for a thorough assessment of the damage wrought by the shipwreck. Above: Smoke bellows from the Golden Ray during salvage operations. The fire was one of many setbacks that hampered the removal of the ship from St. Simons Sound. Throughout the operation, oil and debris were released into the Sound.

In November, Georgia's Environmental Protection Division proposed fining the ship's owner, Hyundai Glovis Co., \$3 million for the damage to Georgia's coast, but Altamaha Riverkeeper and others have called on state officials to do more. They want to hold Hyundai accountable by requesting a Natural Resources Damage Assessment (NRDA) to be conducted by the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA). The NRDA process would provide for further evaluation of the damage to the sound and surrounding areas and determine best methods for restoring damaged natural resources, including assessing and restoring the public's lost use of injured natural resources such as fishing and swimming.

WHAT MUST BE DONE:

Georgia officials must request a Natural Resources Damage Assessment be conducted by NOAA to definitively determine the impact of the Golden Ray ship wreck and salvage operation on St. Simons Sound and the surrounding area. Hyundai should be held accountable for the cost of mitigation and restoration efforts.



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