

Heiltsuk Nation still feeling effects of B.C. tugboat sinking

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Federal Transportation Minister Marc Garneau says the sinking of the tugboat Nathan E. Stewart shows that oil spill response resources on Canada's West Coast are inadequate.

In a meeting with the leaders of the Heiltsuk Nation on Sunday, Mr. Garneau also promised he will deliver a promised ban on oil tanker traffic off British Columbia's North Coast by the end of the year. In fact, an announcement on spill response is expected as early as Monday.

"I know that you are in pain," he said, after hearing of the impact of the spill on the community in Bella Bella and flying over the affected areas.

In photos: Heiltsuk contend with tug-boat spill near Bella Bella

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Hereditary chief Frank Brown told Mr. Garneau to banish Kirby Offshore Marine, the U.S.-based owners of the tug, from the waters inside Heiltsuk territory. “They broke the trust,” he said. “Mr. Minister, you have to know that no amount of money can make this right.”

Mr. Garneau arrived in the Heiltsuk community of Bella Bella a day after the community declared “any and all vessels carrying fuel” are banned from their territorial waters on B.C.’s coast, in the heart of the Great Bear Rainforest. The measure, announced Saturday after a community meeting that was closed to outsiders, was in response to the sinking of a tugboat more than three weeks ago and the ensuing oil spill that has shut down the Heiltsuk’s traditional fisheries because of contamination fears.

Colin Reid, a fisherman from the community, has been pressed into service with his herring skiff, checking the small inlets and beaches for oil and distressed wildlife. Standing on a beach off Gale Creek, where about 50 Heiltsuk families normally would harvest manila and butter clams at this time of year, he fears the impact of the spill will last for years. Thousands of metres of containment booms now surround the beach in an attempt to prevent oil from drifting in.

“It’s a sad sight to see this beach all boomed off. I’ve been harvesting here all my life,” he said. “The impact is devastating.”

Sunday morning was the first time in three days that small boats such as Mr. Reid’s were able to safely get out to assist with the clean up, during a break in storm-force winds that have battered the region.

Marine biologists were out on the water as well, concerned for the humpback whales and orca that feed on the abundant herring. On Sunday, humpbacks were spotted just a few kilometres from the wreck of the Nathan E. Stewart. The smell of diesel was still present in the air.

The reserve community is hosting a team of agencies managing the spill from a meeting room in the band council offices.

Representatives from Western Canada Marine Response Corp., the Canadian Coast Guard, the federal and provincial environment agencies, the Heiltsuk and Kirby Offshore Marine are co-ordinating more than 200 people and dozens of vessels.

But environmental clean-up cannot begin in earnest until the tug is raised – a salvage operation that has been hampered by bad weather.

The Nathan E. Stewart remains submerged on a reef at the entrance to Seaforth Channel, where it ran aground early in the morning of Oct. 13. Only the crow’s nest remains above the waterline, with a red containment boom surrounding the ship in a bid to ensure no additional diesel or lubricant escapes. A sea otter colony lives about 100 metres away, on the shore of Athlone Island.

The area also has sensitive archeological sites, including ancient fish traps and an old village site known as Qvuqa. In addition to clams, the Heiltsuk harvest roe on kelp, salmon, sea cucumbers and edible seaweed here at different times of the year.

During a helicopter flyover of the area on Saturday, biologist Kyle Artelle noted the area also sustains other animals. “We saw wolves running down there three days ago.”

Environmental crews have been collecting samples and are in the process of testing dead crabs and other marine life to determine the impact of the spill.

John Kervel, an environmental emergency response officer for the B.C government, said it is still too early to say what the spill will mean for marine life. “We have had observations of oiled wildlife,” he said.

Brian Wootton, regional director for the Canadian Coast Guard, said the extent of the spill can't be determined until the Nathan E. Stewart is removed from the reef. After the tug's hull was breached as it was battered against the rocks, recovery crews tried to pump out the remaining oil. The tug carried 223,000 litres of oil and to date 101,000 litres have been recovered. “But there may still be product that may come out. We need to get the tug out of the water,” he said. To do that, the salvage team needs a 48-hour window of calmer weather, which could come early next week. But there is no guarantee: “We have low pressure systems stacked up to the Gulf of Alaska right now.”

At the time of the accident, the 28-metre tug was secured to the stern of a 90-metre empty fuel barge with a hinged connection. Combined, the unit is known as an articulated tug barge. ATBs are increasingly being used on the West Coast to transport bulk loads of oil and diesel. The Nathan E. Stewart routinely runs between Vancouver and Alaska through the Inside Passage.

The Transportation Safety Board is investigating the cause of the accident.

Prior to the tug's sinking, the Heiltsuk Nation and other indigenous communities in the region raised concerns about the potential for spills from these fuel barges and had urged the federal Liberal government to enact a promised ban on oil tankers off B.C.'s North Coast.

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