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August 13, 2001

Freighter collision closes seaway

Welland canal: 30 carriers stranded after carrier hits drawbridge

Ralph Bodirsky

National Post, with files from The Standard and The Canadian Press

Salvage officials hope to reopen a critical national transport artery today after a collision between a bulk carrier and a moving lift bridge left as many as 30 ships unable to navigate the St. Lawrence Seaway between lakes Ontario and Erie.



Peter Redman, National Post

The seaway was closed late Saturday night after a 222-metre long vessel carrying a shipment of wheat smashed into the bridge at Allanburg, Ont. Police said the rear portion of the Windoc burst into flames when a lift bridge was lowered, shearing off the ship's smokestack and wheelhouse.

The Windoc caught fire after it collided with a drawbridge. The accident occurred on the Welland Canal near St. Catharines, Ont., on the weekend.

An estimated 25 to 30 ocean and lake vessels are stuck because of the accident, said Blair McKeil, president of McKeil Marine Ltd., the salvage company involved in moving the Windoc.

Four tugboats and a barge with a 150-metre crane were sent to try to move the Windoc out of the way, he said.

"The plan is to shift the ship into a position where it can be moved. We'll work through the night and by daylight or later in the morning we can move it," he said.

Mr. McKeil said he expected the seaway to be reopened by this afternoon. "Something like this doesn't happen all the time. It's a large-scale accident. It's not like a yacht hitting the rocks," he said.

Fire crews used aerial ladder trucks extending from both sides of the canal to put out the blaze, which was finally extinguished yesterday.

Seaway officials said 22 crew members were on board the ship, owned by N.M Paterson and Sons Ltd., a Canada grain and shipping company.

Two crew members were treated for minor injuries.

The vessel, carrying 26,000 tonnes of wheat, was coming from Thunder Bay, Ont. It was headed to lower ports on the St. Lawrence River.

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Damage to the bridge and ship are expected to run into the millions of dollars, although the extent of damage won't be known for several days.

The Canadian Transportation Safety Board was called in to investigate the crash.

The eight-lock canal ties together a critical, 3,700-kilometre transportation waterway that links central Canada with the Atlantic Ocean.

The canal system ties western grain farmers to markets in Europe, the Middle East and Africa.

Michel Drolet, Niagara Region vice-president of the St. Lawrence Seaway Management Corp., said the cause of the collision is unknown and is being investigated.

Mr. Drolet said the bridge was manned at the time and confirmed that it is possible to stop the bridge's centre span in an emergency even after it is set in motion.

But he said the investigation will determine whether the collision was caused by human error or a mechanical or electrical malfunction. "Our intention is to get back in business as soon as we can.

"This year we cannot afford to be slowing down traffic. We need all the business, all the ships that we can get through the system."

Mr. Drolet said the impact on shipping operations is not serious yet, but if the canal is closed for more than a few days, it could be expensive for shipowners and those who use ships to transport goods, with costs mounting quickly to millions of dollars.

The waterway system ties western grain farmers to markets in Europe, the Middle East and Africa.

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