

Australia questions crew of ship that ran aground

April 6 2010, By ROB GRIFFITH , Associated Press Writer



In this Monday, April 5, 2010 handout photo supplied by Queensland Maritime Safety, oil leaks from the Chinese-registered 230-meter-long bulk coal carrier Shen Neng 1st that rests aground on Douglas Shoals off the coast 70 miles east of Rockhampton, Australia. About 2 tons (metric tons) of oil have already spilled from the 1,000 tons (950 metric tons) of fuel on board, creating a 100-yard (meter) slick that stretches 2 miles (3 kilometers), Marine Safety Queensland said in a statement. (AP Photo/Queensland Maritime Safety)

(AP) -- The crew of a coal-carrying ship that ran aground on Australia's Great Barrier Reef and is leaking oil will be questioned Tuesday about why their vessel was in a restricted area, an official said.

Two tugboats were sent Monday to stabilize the Chinese-registered Shen Neng 1 so that it would not break apart and further damage the fragile

coral beneath.

Late Saturday, the Shen Neng 1 rammed into Douglas Shoals, an area that has shipping restrictions in order to protect what is the world's largest coral reef and one that is listed as a [World Heritage site](#) because of its gleaming waters and environmental value as home to thousands of [marine species](#).

"We've always said the vessel is up in an area it shouldn't be in the first place," Marine Safety Queensland general manager Patrick Quirk said. "How it got to that to that position will be the subject of a detailed investigation by the Australian Transport Safety Board."

Quirk said the agency was aware that other [ships](#) sometimes used a shortcut through the reef, a practice that will also be reviewed by the federal government.

The ship's owner, Shenzhen Energy, a subsidiary of the Cosco Group that is China's largest shipping operator, could be fined up to 1 million Australian dollars (\$920,000) for straying from a shipping lane used by 6,000 cargo vessels each year.

"This is a very delicate part of one of the most precious marine environments on earth and there are safe authorized shipping channels - and that's where this ship should have been," Queensland state Premier Anna Bligh said Monday.

She said a boom will be put around the ship Tuesday to contain oil leaking from the hull. Aircraft sprayed chemical dispersants in an effort to break up the slick Sunday.

"Our No. 1 priority is keeping this oil off the Barrier Reef and keeping it contained," she said.

Authorities fear the ship will break apart during the salvage operation and wreck more coral, or spill more of its heavy fuel oil into the sun-soaked sea. However, Bligh said the risk of the ship breaking apart appeared to have lessened since the first of two tug boats arrived and reduced its movement.

About 2 tons (2 metric tons) of oil have already spilled from the 1,000 tons (950 metric tons) of fuel on board, creating a 100-yard (100-meter) slick that stretches 2 miles (3 kilometers), Marine Safety Queensland said in a statement.

Bligh said it could take weeks to dislodge the ship.

"One of the most worrying aspects is that the ship is still moving on the reef to the action of the seas, which is doing further damage" to the coral and hull, Quirk said.

A police boat was standing by to evacuate the 23 crew members if the ship breaks apart.

The bulk carrier was taking about 72,000 tons (65,000 metric tons) of coal to China from the Queensland port of Gladstone when it slammed into the shoals off Queensland's coast in the [Great Barrier Reef](#) Marine Park.

Numerous conservation groups have expressed outrage that bulk carriers can travel through the reef without a specialized marine pilot. Shipping lanes in Australian waters typically require a seasoned captain to go aboard an incoming ship to help navigate around hazards. Until now, the government has said there is no need for marine pilots around the protected area because large ships are banned there.

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