



UNITED STATES COAST GUARD

U.S. Department of Homeland Security

MARINE SAFETY ALERT

Assistant Commandant for Marine Safety, Security and Stewardship

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Alert 4-08

UNLICENSED TO DRIVE

The Coast Guard strongly reminds the towing industry of its responsibility to properly man their vessels with adequate numbers of qualified and licensed crewmembers.

Recently, a collision on the Mississippi river near downtown New Orleans between a Cargo Ship and a loaded oil barge being pushed by an Uninspected Towing Vessel (UTV) resulted in a major oil spill, significant environmental damage, a costly oil spill cleanup response, closed "The River" for six straight days, and caused significant economic loss to the local Louisiana economy.

The Commander, Eighth Coast Guard District, convened a formal investigation into the incident. While the investigation continues, the preliminary findings of this inquiry have revealed that the tug was operated solely by an individual who held a Coast Guard Apprentice Mate (Steersman) license and who was not authorized to independently direct its movement. An apprentice is strictly prohibited from operating a towing vessel unless in the presence of a properly licensed Master or Mate (Pilot). Coincidentally, just a few days prior to this incident another UTV was involved in a marine casualty that resulted in the sinking of the tug. The preliminary investigation into that incident revealed that the crewmember operating that vessel at the time of the casualty only held a Coast Guard Apprentice Mate license and similarly was not authorized to independently operate the tug.

Failure to properly man a vessel may result in significant penalties and fines, not to mention other, possibly more significant and costly civil litigation. Possible enforcement actions include issuing civil penalties, taking mariners who hold a Coast Guard issued credential (e.g. a license or merchant mariner's document) to a suspension and revocation hearing in order to suspend or revoke that credential, and/or refer a violation to the United States Attorney for criminal prosecution. The Coast Guard may also shut down the operation of vessel or facility, or prohibit a vessel from entering a particular port or place until such time a specific violation is corrected.

While the costs associated with the fines and penalties can be very severe, had this incident involved a collision with a small passenger vessel or ferry commonly known to transit in and around New Orleans this casualty may have had a much more severe outcome: a significant loss of life!

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