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State's biggest barge crane aids Inlet salvage operation

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COURTESY GLOBAL DIVING & SALVAGE

In March, a mechanical failure caused a 180-foot steel fender to detach from the Christy Lee oil-loading platform on the west side of Cook Inlet near Kalgin Island. Now a major diving operation is under way to retrieve the sunken piece for repairs.

Size matters for this operation. The biggest marine crane currently operating in Alaska has been commissioned to lift the massive piece of infrastructure. The Derrick Barge Salvation is 300-foot by 90-foot barge with a 600-ton crane. It has the capacity to lift 600 tons off the stern and 350 tons over the side.

The Salvation also carries a 110-ton capacity support crane and a four-way mooring system to assist in the rigging and service lifts.

Pacific Pile and Marine is operating the Salvation and providing the heavy lift support. The Salvation is the largest piece of its marine construction fleet.

The specialized machine will pull the dormant fender off the ocean floor. It will then be raised, repaired and reattached.

"I suspect before the end of October it will be fully installed and back functioning," said Hilcorp Facilities Manager Bo York said. Cook Inlet Pipeline Co. owns the Christy Lee while Hilcorp is the parent company. Cook Inlet Pipeline is a common carrier company, enabling the two to operate independently.

The repairs are mostly for the hoist mechanism, which is what failed in March. The fender itself will require minor repairs.

Christy Lee is an offshore platform that's unique in Cook Inlet in that it's an oil-loading facility as opposed to being an exploration and production platform.

The fender acts as a buffer for offloading vessels. After it dislodged and sank, Tesoro Maritime Co., which is Christy Lee's sole shipping customer, was worried about sending tankers to the platform. York said a tanker vessel typically goes into the port every 10 to 14 days so a solution had to be drawn fast.

"Without this fender there, Tesoro was not comfortable bringing their tanker vessel up," York said.

A temporary floating fender system was quickly installed. This system could only be temporary because it would not be able to handle the winter ice in Cook Inlet.

York said having the temporary system hasn't affected productivity. The floating mechanism can handle the same vessels the mounted on can.

"From day one, it was fully functional," he said. "The only reason why it's temporary is because of the ice conditions."

Pacific Pile and Marine operates the Salvation. Division Manager Jason Davis said this project, combined with another for the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, allowed Pacific Pile and Marine to commission the large crane. The company is already working on future projects to help justify a permanent home in Alaska for it. After this operation, the Salvation will aid in constructing the new Carl E. Moses Harbor breakwater in Unalaska.

Davis said the intention is to keep the Salvation in Cook Inlet so that it may service the oil and gas industry, but it will depend on demand. Davis said the company will expand its market search to Puget Sound if the need arises because there's been interest in that region. Still, he hopes to keep it here as an asset to the oil and gas industry.

"We really value this Alaskan market," he said.

Davis said Pacific Pile and Marine has a lease purchase agreement for the Salvation.

The diving support and salvage expertise comes from Global Diving & Salvage Inc., which has worked with Pacific Pile and Marine before. Part of the company's job is to attach the underwater piece of massive metal to the crane.

Global Diving's vice president of marine causality response, David DeVilbiss, said this project is a good example of a piece of equipment specially needed for one project but can be used for others.

"We've committed to keep marine construction working in Alaska," Davis said.

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