

Environmental groups hosting Golden Ray town hall

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With the two-year saga of the shipwrecked Golden Ray nearly behind the community, several coastal environmental advocacy groups are hosting a public meeting Thursday on St. Simons Island to discuss ramifications to the ecosystem in the aftermath and possible responses.

The Golden Ray Town Hall meeting is set for 6 to 7:30 p.m. Thursday in Room 108 at the Casino, 550 Beachview Drive, near the island's Pier Village.

The Altama Riverkeeper, 100 Miles, the Glynn Environmental Coalition and the Satilla Riverkeeper are hosting the meeting.

Among other things, the event's hosts will outline the recent record \$3 million fine imposed against the ship's owner, Hyundai Glovis Co., by the state Environmental Protection Division, said Maggie Van Cantfort, a watershed specialist with the Altamaha Riverkeeper. The EPD's order cited numerous large releases of oil and debris that violated state water quality standards during the salvage operation, which began in November 2020 and completed in late October.

Van Cantfort said the town forum also will address the need for urging the state Department of Natural Resources to conduct a Natural Resources Damage Assessment (NRDA) of the ecosystem in the wake of the Golden Ray disaster.

Altamaha Riverkeeper Executive Director Fletcher Sams and other advocates of the environment have called on the DNR to conduct a NRDA since the disaster occurred more than two years ago.

Event organizers also are eager to receive any public input regarding potential environmental impacts from the shipwreck, she said.

"We want to try and put everything into context and then just open it up to the public," Van Cantfort said. "We really want to hear the concerns the public may have. Hopefully, we can answer any of their questions."

Salvors wrapped up the bulk of the Golden Ray salvage project in late October, hauling away via dry dock barge the last gargantuan section of the massive shipwreck. The 656-foot-long Golden Ray overturned Sept. 8, 2019, while heading to sea with a cargo of 4,161 vehicles, ensconcing itself half-submerged on a sandbar in the St. Simons Sound between Jekyll and St. Simons islands.

Two massive oil discharges leaked from the shipwreck's fuel tanks in the weeks immediately after, fouling marsh habitat and numerous miles of inland shoreline. Employing the 255-foot-tall VB 10,000 crane vessel to power a massive cutting chain, salvors tore the mammoth shipwreck into eight gargantuan pieces over a period of nearly 12 months.

The VB 10,000 hoisted each section onto barges for removal from the sound.

Frequent oil leaks occurred during the separation and lifting of the sections, most notably in late July when a thick river of oil washed over marsh habitat, beaches and Johnson rocks on St. Simons Island's south end.

A massive fire in May, sparked by a welder's torch and fueled by hundreds of vehicles inside, sent waves of burnt plastic debris to the shores of Jekyll and St. Simons islands.

The EPD's consent order last month noted these "significant" incidents and a lesser daily "discharge of pollutants" in reaching the \$3 million fine amount, the highest ever imposed by the agency. It noted, however, that discharges of oil and other pollutants have left no long-term damage to the ecosystem.

The EPD has informed the Golden Ray's owner that it can pay the \$3 million fine or take corrective cleanup action in affected area waters. Van Cantfort said money from the fine would go to the general fund of the state treasurer.

Residents have until Dec. 23 to mail comments or concerns to: EPD Comments, Environmental Protection Division, 2 Martin Luther King Jr. Drive, SE, Atlanta, GA, 30334. Comments also can be emailed to epdcomments@dnr.ga.gov.

Van Cantfort said a NRDA study might better define damages as a result of pollution from the Golden Ray, identifying everything from loss of waterfowl habitat to the impact on recreational fishing and potential damage to the marsh's natural water filtering system. Any reparations as a result of a NRDA study would go back into enhancing the local ecosystem, she said.

The DNR reported taking thousands of air and water quality readings during the Golden Ray debacle, reporting no signs of permanent damage. DNR biologists also reported no longterm damage to the fish, crab and shrimp populations.

But DNR has not conducted a NRDA, nor has it announced plans to do so, Van Cantfort said.

“That is what is actually going to assess how it has impacted the ecosystem and what is needed for restoration,” Van Cantfort said. “It would be going directly toward restoration efforts.”

Van Cantfort noted previous incidences in which DNR authorized NRDA studies that resulted in fines against ship owners for polluting Georgia’s coastal waters. Notably, she said, a NRDA study resulted in the owners of the vessel Fortune Epoch paying \$600,000 in “restorations funds” after spilling 6,800 gallons of fuel into Chatham County waters in 2004.

“And that was a smaller amount over a shorter period of time,” Van Cantfort said. “We need this Natural Resources Damage Assessment and we don’t understand why they aren’t guaranteeing it.”

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