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News Release



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GROUNDING VESSEL SUCCESSFULLY REMOVED FROM HAWAIIAN ISLANDS NATIONAL WILDLIFE REFUGE

HONOLULU - The 145-foot motor vessel *Casitas*, which ran aground at Pearl and Hermes Atoll on July 2, has been successfully extracted from the reef and entombed northwest of the atoll in approximately 7,200 feet of water, the Unified Command announced today.

“On behalf of all the parties involved, we are very pleased to see this operation safely completed,” said U.S. Coast Guard Captain Manson Brown, Federal On-Scene Coordinator for the Unified Command, which includes the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, manager of the refuge. “The Unified Command shared a common commitment to remove the potential pollutants and extract the vessel from the reef with no human injuries and as little damage to the environment as possible. Given the remote location and the significance of the reef ecosystem, it was a challenge – a challenge we can now say we met.”

The Pearl and Hermes Atoll is part of the Northwestern Hawaiian Islands ecosystem, home to some 7,000 species, at least one-quarter of which are found nowhere else in the world. The highly endangered Hawaiian monk seal is found here, as well as the threatened green sea turtle and endangered leatherback, loggerhead and hawksbill sea turtles. An estimated 14 million seabirds thrive on these islands and in their waters, including 99 percent of the world’s Laysan albatrosses and 98 percent of the black-footed albatross population.

The *Casitas* was pulled off the atoll’s reef at 11:31 a.m. Thursday morning. The operation began early in the morning as ballast water was pumped from the *Casitas* to refloat the vessel. Additional holes in the hull were patched and pumps were kept operating to keep the *Casitas* afloat until it reached an approved disposal site at approximately 1:35 p.m.

Earlier this week, approximately 1,850 gallons of gasoline were transferred from the *Casitas* to the 240-foot barge serving as the operations base for the extraction. Equipment and personal gear were also removed from the *Casitas*. Because of safety concerns, about 15 tons of marine debris and other trash were left on the vessel but stowed in sealed, double-hulled holds. Entombment of this type is not unusual.

The successful entombment of the Casitas ends this phase of the operation. In the near future, a team of representatives from State of Hawaii, National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, and responsible party will gather at Pearl and Hermes Atoll to begin assessing injuries to the atoll's natural resources.

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service is the principal Federal agency responsible for conserving, protecting and enhancing fish, wildlife and plants and their habitats for the continuing benefit of the American people. The Service manages the 95-million-acre National Wildlife Refuge System, which encompasses 545 national wildlife refuges, thousands of small wetlands and other special management areas. It also operates 69 national fish hatcheries, 64 fishery resources offices and 81 ecological services field stations. The agency enforces federal wildlife laws, administers the Endangered Species Act, manages migratory bird populations, restores nationally significant fisheries, conserves and restores wildlife habitat such as wetlands, and helps foreign and Native American tribal governments with their conservation efforts. It also oversees the Federal Assistance program, which distributes hundreds of millions of dollars in excise taxes on fishing and hunting equipment to state fish and wildlife agencies.