



# National Transportation Safety Board

## Marine Accident Brief

### Grounding and Sinking of Fishing Vessel *Southern Bell*

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<b>Accident no.</b>	DCA18FM001
<b>Vessel name</b>	<i>Southern Bell</i>
<b>Accident type</b>	Grounding and Sinking
<b>Location</b>	Gulf of Mexico, east of Sabine Pass Jetty Channel, Texas 29°39.23' N, 93°49.42' W
<b>Date</b>	October 13, 2017
<b>Time</b>	0705 central daylight time (coordinated universal time – 5 hours)
<b>Injuries</b>	None
<b>Damage</b>	\$519,000 est.
<b>Environmental damage</b>	Approximately 3,800 gallons of diesel and oil
<b>Weather</b>	Visibility 9 miles, clear skies, winds east-northeast at 4 mph, waves east 1–2 feet, air temperature 72°F
<b>Waterway information</b>	The Sabine Pass Channel connects Sabine and Neches Rivers with the Gulf of Mexico. The channel has a depth of 40 feet and is located between Jefferson County, Texas, and Cameron Parish, Louisiana.

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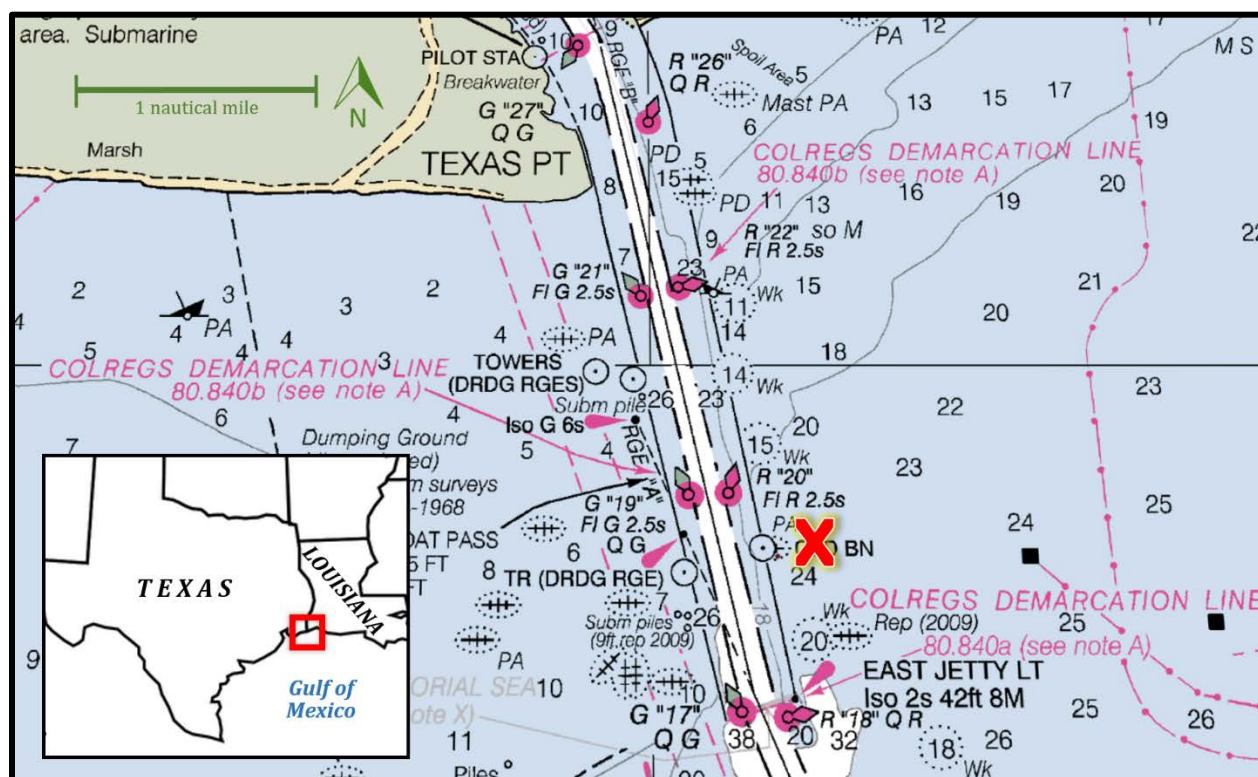
On October 13, 2017, at 0705 local time, the uninspected fishing vessel *Southern Bell* grounded outside of the east jetty for the entrance to the Sabine Pass Channel, an outlet for the Sabine and Neches Rivers into the Gulf of Mexico. The vessel heeled over on its port side and began flooding through open doors to the engine room and accommodation space before sinking. The captain and two crewmembers entered the water and were rescued by a Good Samaritan vessel nearby without suffering any injuries. A light oil sheen and debris were later observed. The vessel, valued at an estimated \$519,000, was determined to be unsalvageable.



*Southern Bell*, moored at an unknown location and date. (Photo courtesy of Phuong Huynh)

\*Unless otherwise noted, in this report all *miles* are nautical miles (1.15 statute miles); *speeds* are speed over ground; and *courses* are course over ground.

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A red X marks the site where the *Southern Bell* grounded and subsequently sank outside the east jetty for the entrance channel to Sabine Pass, Texas, near buoy R (red) "20". (National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration [NOAA] chart 11342)

The 120-gross-ton, 74-foot uninspected fishing vessel *Southern Bell* was originally constructed in 1978 at Master Marine Inc. in Bayou La Batre, Alabama. Built as a double-beamed trawler, the vessel underwent a series of name changes (*Master Bill*, *Robin Paulette*, and *Capt Lee*) until the current owners renamed it the *Southern Bell* around 2012.

At about 1430 on October 12, 2017, the day before the accident, the vessel departed the dock at the Dustin Gulf Seafood facility in Sabine Pass, Texas, with the captain (who was the owner and operator) and two crewmembers.<sup>1</sup> The *Southern Bell* traveled southbound, approximately 95 miles offshore, to an area in the Gulf of Mexico known as the South Sabine Point lightering zone, where the crewmembers prepared to begin trawling for shrimp.<sup>2</sup> However, approximately 15 minutes after they deployed the fishing gear about 0100 on October 13, the bridle—a steel cable used to connect the net's trawl doors to the vessel's main pulling cable—parted. In response, the captain decided to return to the Port of Sabine Pass for repair of the equipment and, at 0120, began the inbound transit.

<sup>1</sup> Information for position dates, times, speeds, and courses over ground are based upon electronic data broadcasted by the *Southern Bell*'s automatic identification system (AIS).

<sup>2</sup> The South Sabine Point lightering zone is an area in the Gulf of Mexico where lightering operations are performed, in which cargo is transferred between vessels of different sizes, such as from a tankship to a tank barge, to reduce a vessel's draft in order to enter port facilities. The boundaries of these lightering zones in the gulf are identified in Title 33 *Code of Federal Regulations*, Part 156.300.

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Meanwhile, at about 0600, the *Hyundai Princepia*, a 970-foot liquefied natural gas (LNG) carrier, departed the Sabine Pass LNG terminal facility located on the Louisiana side of the Sabine River in Cameron Parish to begin its outbound transit toward the Gulf of Mexico. Two Sabine pilots were on board assisting the bridge team with navigation of the vessel, which had a draft of 33 feet. The Sabine Pass Channel was maintained by the US Army Corps of Engineers to a controlling depth of 40 feet at mean lower low water.<sup>3</sup> As such, the *Hyundai Princepia* was very limited in its ability to deviate from its various headings outbound in the channel.

At 0640, the *Southern Bell* was proceeding on a course of 353 degrees at a speed of 8.3 knots just west of buoys G (green) “29” and R (red) “30”. Over the next several minutes, its speed remained constant, but its course deviated to the northeast to a course of 008 degrees, which would take the vessel across the Outer Bar Channel. The *Southern Bell*’s track, which could have potentially developed into a crossing situation with a risk of collision, raised the concern of the pilots and bridge team on the *Hyundai Princepia* while it was proceeding southbound in a reach of the Sabine Pass Channel known as the Jetty Channel.<sup>4</sup> The lead pilot ordered the speed of the *Hyundai Princepia* to be reduced slightly; consequently, the vessel slowed from 9.7 to 8.8 knots and widened the closest point of approach between the two vessels.

Between 0644 and 0646, one of the pilots on the *Hyundai Princepia* attempted multiple times to contact the *Southern Bell* using VHF radio on both channels 16 and 13 but received no response. Although he did not consider the vessels’ activity a near-miss and therefore did not file a written report, he notified Vessel Traffic Service (VTS) Port Arthur, Texas, of the encounter via VHF radio.

Traveling at a speed of 8.1 knots with a course of 009 degrees, the *Southern Bell* crossed the Outer Bar Channel at 0648 ahead of the *Hyundai Princepia* with an estimated closest point of approach of 0.57 miles off the bow of the *Hyundai Princepia*. Over the next several minutes, the *Southern Bell* maintained a course in a northerly direction ranging from 359 to 010 degrees at a speed of 8.2 knots. At 0658, the vessel began slowly turning to port, with its speeds remaining relatively constant (at 8.4 knots with a course of 351 degrees). However, its course swung from 003 to 288 degrees, until at 0705 the vessel grounded on the rocks outside the Sabine Pass east jetty near buoy R “20”.

The deckhands, who had been sleeping, were awakened by what one of them described as a “loud boom.” They then left their stateroom and headed toward the engine room where they saw water entering. The captain could not determine the exact source of the flooding when he performed a damage assessment of the vessel but noticed that the water level in the engine room was rising quickly. One of the deckhands discharged a handheld flare, which was seen by nearby vessels. A Sabine pilot reported the flare sighting to the U.S. Coast Guard at 0727.

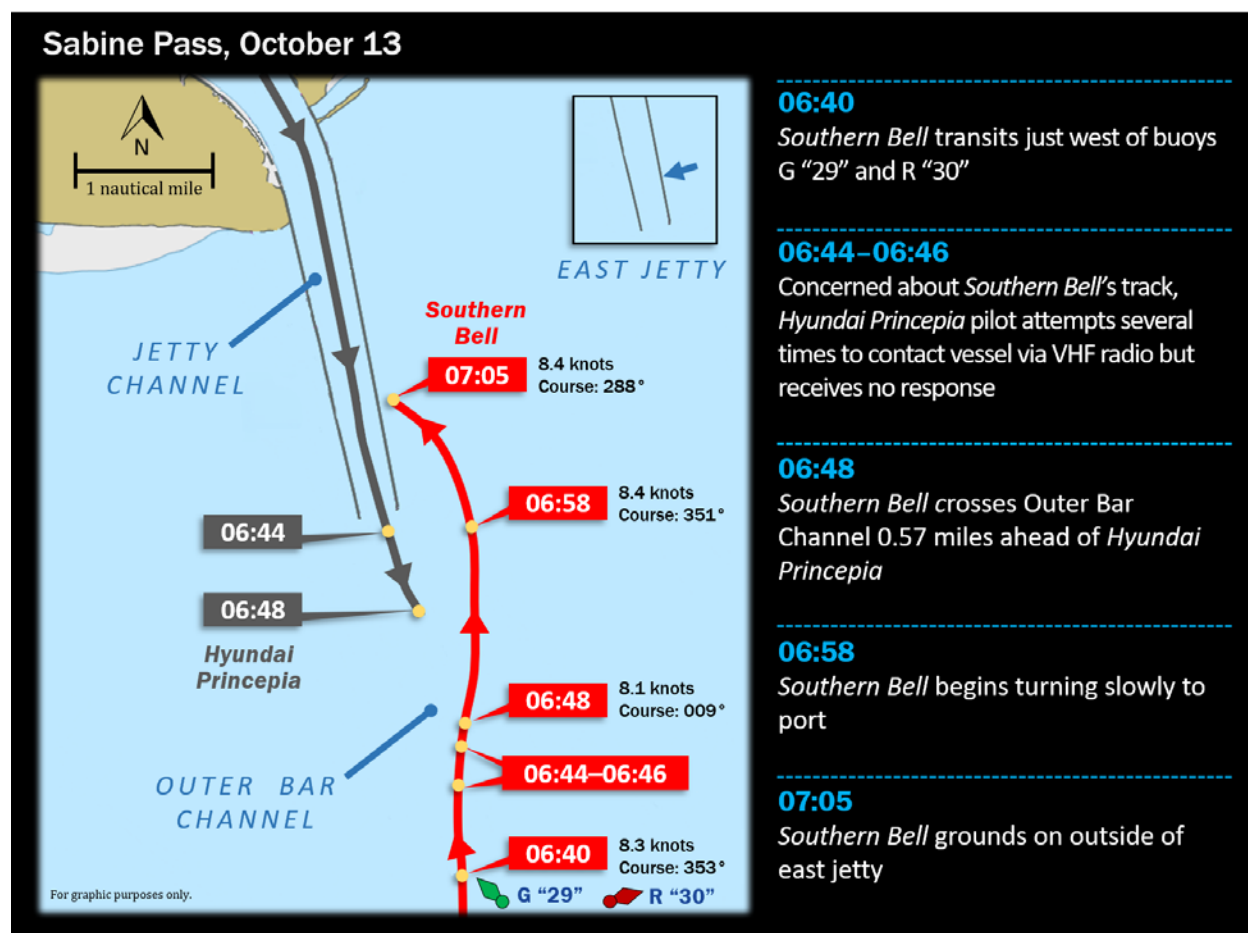
According to video footage captured by VTS Port Arthur, the *Southern Bell* heeled over on the port side and then sank at 0729. The captain and two crewmembers entered the water and were later recovered by an unknown Good Samaritan vessel. At 0736, the Coast Guard small boat CG 45663 departed the station in Sabine Pass for the location of the grounding. At 0816, the crewmembers of the *Southern Bell* were transferred to the CG 45663 and taken ashore in Sabine Pass, where the captain and one of the deckhands were interviewed by Coast Guard investigators.

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<sup>3</sup> Mean lower low water is the lower low water heights for each tidal day averaged over a 19-year cycle.

<sup>4</sup> The Jetty Channel is marked by “two nearly parallel jetties [constructed] about 550 yards apart extending about 3.5 miles in a south direction from shore.” Source: *U.S. Coast Pilot 5*, 46<sup>th</sup> ed. (2018), ch. 10.

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The captain stated that the *Southern Bell* experienced a steering problem as it was approaching the entrance to the port. He departed the wheelhouse and proceeded to the lazarette to troubleshoot the issue, leaving the wheelhouse unmanned. When he entered the compartment and examined the vessel's mechanical chain-and-wire steering system, he discovered that a connection in the chain link had failed. He decided to return to the wheelhouse but then noticed that the vessel was heading towards the rock jetty. Before the captain could reach the wheelhouse to shift the vessel's transmission into neutral, the *Southern Bell* was "on the rocks" of the jetty, he said. Based on his estimation, he was out of the wheelhouse for about 5 minutes. However, no explanation was offered for why the captain left the *Southern Bell*'s transmission in gear when he departed the wheelhouse.

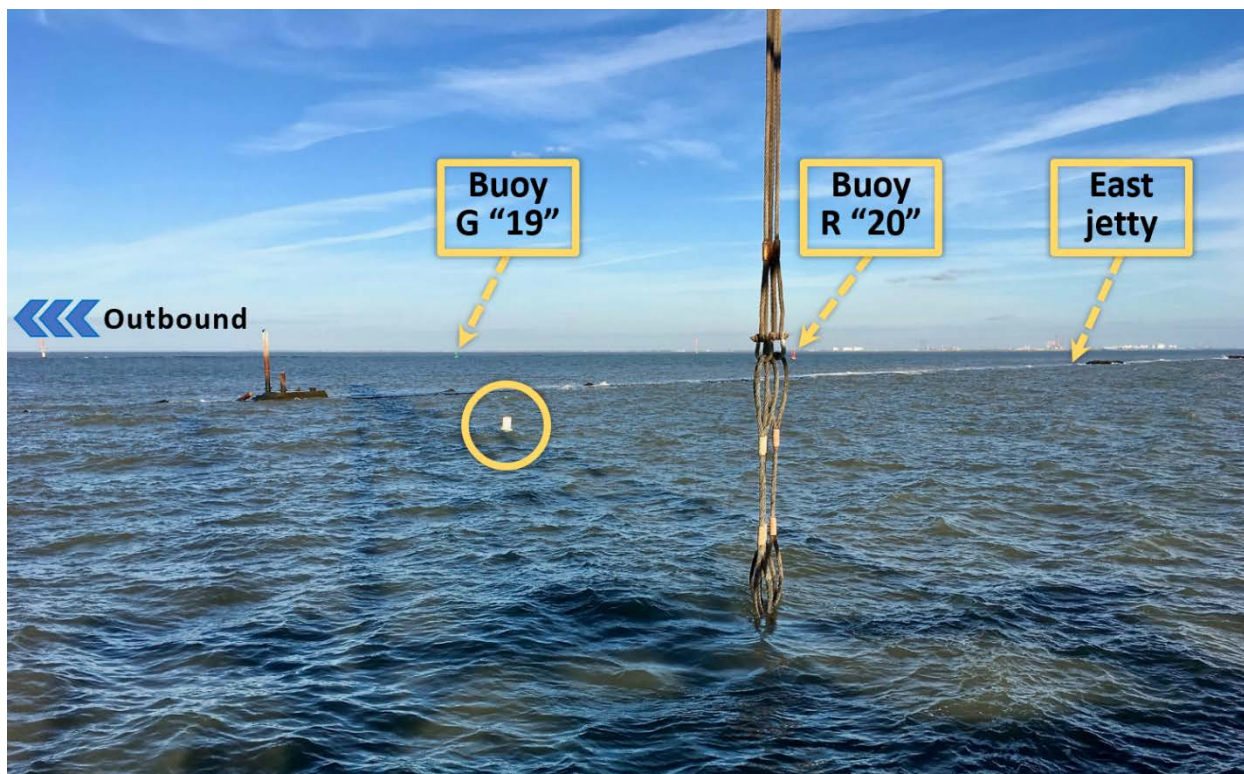
According to the captain's statement, the vessel's engine room flooded quickly, causing the electrical generator to fail, which resulted in the loss of power supplied to the bilge pump. He believed that the water possibly entered through a fracture in the bow and progressed through the vessel because there were no watertight bulkheads between the bow and the engine room; the transverse bulkhead between the two spaces had been holed due to corrosion.

After the vessel sank, an oil sheen was observed on the water's surface following the discharge of approximately 3,800 gallons of diesel fuel and lube oil reported to be on board. Pollution-response personnel from the Coast Guard directed the captain of the *Southern Bell* to take appropriate action to mitigate the potential for damage to the environment. The captain claimed that he did not have insurance on the vessel and that he was unable to pay the cost associated with the pollution-response effort. He was issued both a "Notice of Federal Interest for an Oil Pollution

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Incident” and a “Notice of Federal Assumption.” Under the authority of the *Federal Water Pollution Control Act*, the Coast Guard proceeded to mitigate the effects of the oil release, deploying a contracted salvage and environmental response team to the location. After an examination of the vessel, divers determined not to salvage the *Southern Bell* but instead to leave it where it was submerged and continue monitoring the site for pollution.

The captain, despite being informed about the post-casualty requirement for chemical testing, did not submit a breath or urine specimen or provide any chemical test results to the Coast Guard. His written work/rest profile was provided, but the data was incomplete and therefore could not be analyzed.



The white buoy (circled) was placed by the Coast Guard to locate the wreck of the *Southern Bell*. Navigation buoys G “19” and R “20” mark the Sabine Pass Jetty Channel beyond the east jetty. In the foreground are the lifting wires from a salvage barge; in the background, the structure to the left is the remnant of a channel marker no longer maintained.

## Analysis

Audio captured by VTS Port Arthur confirmed that between 0644 and 0646 one of the pilots on the *Hyundai Princepia* attempted to hail the *Southern Bell* unsuccessfully several times using VHF radio. These attempts to contact the vessel occurred about 20 minutes before the *Southern Bell* grounded at 0705 outside of the east jetty near buoy R “20”. Thus, if the captain was in the wheelhouse at that time, he either did not hear the call or chose not to respond.

It is likely that the captain did not respond to the VHF radio calls because he had already vacated the wheelhouse and either was walking aft or already in the lazarette addressing the steering gear failure at the time of the pilot’s calls. However, leaving the wheelhouse without calling one of the other crewmembers to keep lookout was a poor decision. Moreover, leaving the transmission in forward gear only compounded the situation, considering the vessel’s approach to the Sabine Pass Channel.

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The captain was operating the vessel for over 24 hours. While fatigue may have been a factor in the captain's decision-making, investigators did not have sufficient information to evaluate his work/rest profile in the days preceding the accident. Regardless, the captain's actions not only placed himself and the deckhands on board the *Southern Bell* at risk but also could have compromised the safety of those individuals serving on vessels operating nearby, such as the *Hyundai Princepia*.

### Probable Cause

The National Transportation Safety Board determines that the probable cause of the grounding and subsequent sinking of the *Southern Bell* was the captain's decision to leave the wheelhouse unattended while still making way as the vessel approached the entrance channel to Sabine Pass.

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### Vessel Particulars

Vessel	<i>Southern Bell</i>
Owner / operator	Phuong Huynh
Port of registry	Bayou La Batre, Alabama
Flag	United States
Type	Commercial fishing vessel
Year built	1978
Official number (US)	591119
IMO number	7742554
Construction	Steel
Classification society	N/A
Length	74.1 ft (22.6 m)
Draft	11.2 ft (3.4 m)
Beam/width	22 ft (6.7 m)
Gross/net tonnage	120/81 tons
Engine power; manufacturer	450 hp diesel, single screw (manufacturer unknown)
Persons on board	3

**NTSB investigators worked closely with our counterparts from Coast Guard Marine Safety Unit Port Arthur (Texas) throughout this investigation.**

For more details about this accident, visit [www.nts.gov](http://www.nts.gov) and search for NTSB accident ID DCA18FM001.

**Issued: June 4, 2018**

The NTSB has authority to investigate and establish the probable cause of any major marine casualty or any marine casualty involving both public and nonpublic vessels under Title 49 *United States Code*, Section 1131(b)(1). This report is based on factual information either gathered by NTSB investigators or provided by the Coast Guard from its informal investigation of the accident.

The NTSB does not assign fault or blame for a marine casualty; rather, as specified by NTSB regulation, “[NTSB] investigations are fact-finding proceedings with no formal issues and no adverse parties . . . and are not conducted for the purpose of determining the rights or liabilities of any person.” Title 49 *Code of Federal Regulations*, Section 831.4.

Assignment of fault or legal liability is not relevant to the NTSB’s statutory mission to improve transportation safety by conducting investigations and issuing safety recommendations. In addition, statutory language prohibits the admission into evidence or use of any part of an NTSB report related to an accident in a civil action for damages resulting from a matter mentioned in the report. Title 49 *United States Code*, Section 1154(b).