October 10, 2025 MIR-25-37

Grounding of the Towing Vessel *John M Donnelly*

On October 30, 2023, at 1610 local time, the towing vessel *John M Donnelly* was pushing 25 empty dry cargo barges upbound at mile 246.5 on the Lower Mississippi River, near Baton Rouge, Louisiana, when it grounded on a submerged obstruction (see figure 1 and figure 2).[1] One crew member sustained a minor injury. No pollution was reported. The cost of damage to the vessel was $505,834.[2]

Figure 1. *John M Donnelly* in 2022. (Source: Greg Milliken)

[1] In this report, all times are central daylight time, and all miles are statute miles.

[2] Visit ntsb.gov to find additional information in the public docket for this NTSB investigation (case no. DCA24FM007). Use the CAROL Query to search investigations.

NOTE: This report was reissued on January 6, 2026, with a correction to the river mile number on page 7.

Casualty Summary	
NTSB casualty category	Grounding/Stranding
Location	Lower Mississippi River, mile 246.5, near Baton Rouge, Louisiana 30°34.01′ N, 091°15.91′ W
Date	October 30, 2023
Time	1610 central daylight time (coordinated universal time –5 hrs)
Persons on board	8
Injuries	1 minor
Property damage	$505,834
Environmental damage	None reported
Weather	Visibility 10 mi, overcast, winds north at 12 kts, gusts 18 kts, air temperature 57°F, water temperature 73°F, sunset 1818, evening civil twilight 1843
Waterway information	River; width 1,780 ft between obstruction and left descending bank, charted depth (above low water reference level) 9 ft in channel, 5 ft at obstruction

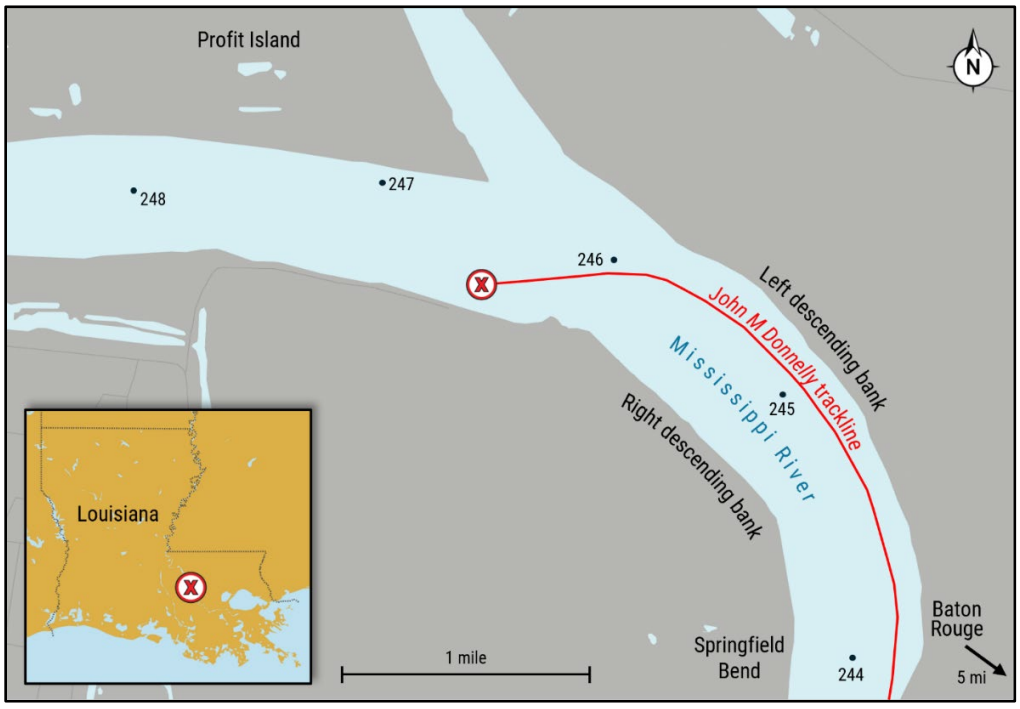

Figure 2. Location of *John M Donnelly* grounding, as indicated by a red *X*. (Background source: Google Maps)

1 Factual Information

On the afternoon of October 30, 2023, the 186-foot-long, steel-hulled towing vessel *John M Donnelly* was pushing 25 empty dry cargo barges in 5 strings of 5 barges upbound on the Lower Mississippi River. The *John M Donnelly* operated under its company's towing safety management system (TSMS) and had a valid US Coast Guard-issued certificate of inspection documenting compliance with 46 *Code of Federal Regulations* Subchapter M.

At 1545, the *John M Donnelly*'s pilot began maneuvering the tow around Springfield Bend, a turn in the river about 5 miles north of Baton Rouge, Louisiana.[3] Through the turn, the tow transited closer to the left descending bank at a speed of 9 miles per hour, generally following the "recommended track" (sailing line) shown on the inland electronic navigation chart (IENC) and displayed on the vessel's electronic charting system (ECS).[4] Near the end of the bend, the *John M Donnelly* tow met a downbound tow, *William B Klunk,* and the two tows passed port to port at mile 245 on the river.

A half mile upriver from the *John M Donnelly*, the *Rick Calhoun* and *Fritz* tows were stopped alongside the left descending bank at Profit Island. The tows were waiting for the downbound *Hortense B Ingram* tow to pass through a narrow section of the channel south of the island. According to the *John M Donnelly* pilot, he contacted the operators on each of the tows via VHF radio and arranged to cross his tow over toward the right descending bank to avoid the two stopped tows and to meet the *Hortense B Ingram* starboard to starboard. After reaching agreement with the other tow operators, the *John M Donnelly* pilot began maneuvering across the channel about 1605. As the tow crossed the channel, it moved away from the recommended track shown on the IENC.

A submerged obstruction was located 600 feet off the right descending bank at mile 246.5. The IENC showed the obstruction as an area of shallow water 5 feet deep (see figure 3). (Depths on IENCs were measured from the local low water reference level.)

[3] *Pilot* is a term used aboard towing vessels on inland waterways for a person, other than the captain, who navigates the vessel.

[4] (a) The inland towing industry refers to the shorelines of Western Rivers as the left and right banks when traveling (facing) down river. The left bank is called the *left descending bank* and the right bank is called the *right descending bank*. (b) The *recommended track*, also known as the *sailing line* on inland navigational charts, is a nonregulated recommended route within the reaches of a navigable channel.

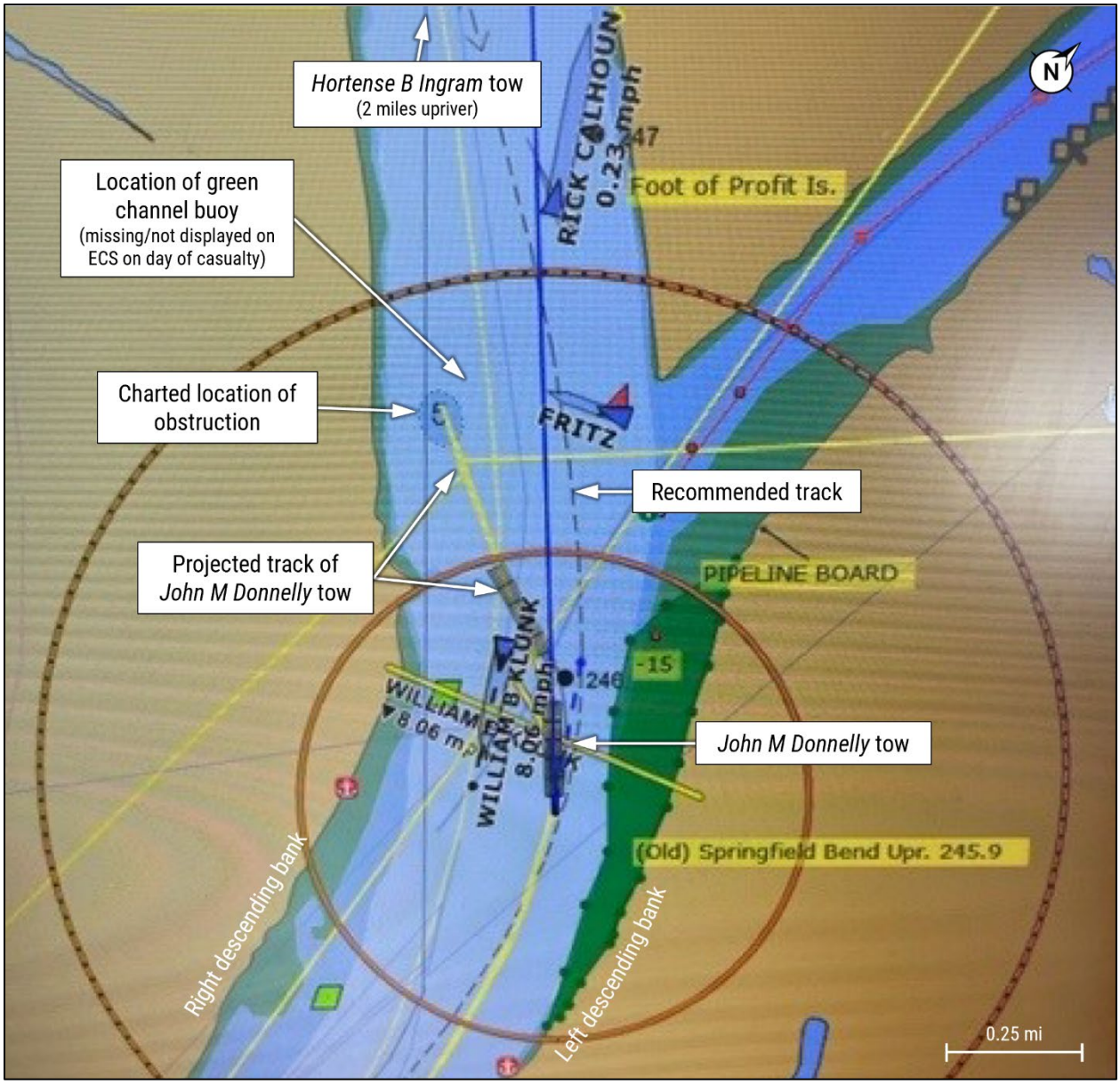

Figure 3. Screen capture from replay of *John M Donnelly* Rose Point ECS at 1604:25 on October 30, 2023, 3.5 minutes before the towing vessel grounded. (Background source: Coast Guard)

As the *John M Donnelly* approached the right descending bank, the tow crossed over the obstruction. None of the empty barges contacted the obstruction, but the *John M* Donnelly, with its 9.5-foot draft, struck it, bringing the tow to a stop at 1610. A crewmember who was in the towing vessel's berthing area during the grounding later reported a minor neck injury as a result of the incident.

The tow's barges were removed from the scene without damage, but the *John M Donnelly* remained stranded on the obstruction. On November 2, the towing

vessel was refloated by salvors and towed to a repair facility. The grounding damaged the vessel; it inset hull bottom plating and tripped vertical stanchions; opened a weld seam on a fuel tank, resulting in an internal leak; and caused other structural damage around the impact site (see figure 4). Damage repairs cost $505,834.

Figure 4. Bottom plating near the bow of the *John M Donnelly* that was inset when the vessel grounded. (Source: Budwine and Associates, LLC)

According to Coast Guard personnel who maintain Mississippi River navigation aids, a green channel buoy had been placed near the obstruction in late 2022 following a previous grounding. However, when investigators arrived at the scene of the *John M Donnelly* grounding, the channel buoy was missing (it is not uncommon for buoys on the Mississippi River to be displaced due to high currents or buildup of debris around the navigation aids). Investigators could not determine when the navigation aid was displaced. Additionally, the buoy was not shown on the *John M Donnelly*'s ECS display when investigators replayed the casualty event on the system. The shallow area marking the obstruction was visible on the ECS display (see figure 3).

In October 2023, water levels in the Mississippi River were at historically low levels.[5] On October 30, the US Geological Survey (USGS) river gage at Baton Rouge measured a height of 5.3 feet, 6.9 feet below the 28-year average height for that calendar date. The USGS gage height zero reading was about 2.5 feet below the low water reference level for IENC charts.[6] A Coast Guard local notice to mariners (LNM) that was effective at the time of the casualty stated, "Due to low water levels on the Mississippi River, charted depths may vary along the outer channel limits in the vicinity of Profit Island, between Mile 246.0 to Mile 253.0 … Mariners are urged to transit the area with extreme caution."[7]

[5] National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, "Mississippi River Hit Record-Low Levels in October," https://www.noaa.gov/news/mississippi-river-hit-record-low-levels-in-october.

[6] The exact difference between the low water reference level and the USGS gage height at Baton Rouge has not been established. However, the difference between the low water reference level and a nearby US Army Corps of Engineers river gage height was 2.5 feet, and, according to a USGS representative, the USGS river gage and the Corps of Engineers gage readings were usually within .1 feet. Therefore, the difference between the low water reference level and the USGS gage height is estimated to be about 2.5 feet in this report. (The Corps of Engineers gage did not record a height on October 30, 2023.)

[7] Coast Guard, 2023, "District 8 Gulf LNM, Week 44-23," https://www.navcen.uscg.gov/sites/default/files/pdf/lnms/lnm0844g2023.pdf.

2 Analysis

On October 30, 2023, the towing vessel *John M Donnelly* was pushing 25 empty dry cargo barges upbound on the Lower Mississippi River, near Baton Rouge, Louisiana, when it grounded on a submerged obstruction.

As the 25-barge *John M Donnelly* tow approached Profit Island before the grounding, the *Rick Calhoun* and *Fritz* tows were stopped on the left descending bank awaiting the passage of the downbound *Hortense B Ingram* tow. To pass the stopped tows and meet the *Hortense B Ingram* tow starboard to starboard, the *John M Donnelly* pilot maneuvered the tow across the channel near the right descending bank. Given the historically low water levels in the Mississippi River, the pilot should have exercised caution as the tow approached the bank.

An obstruction was located 600 feet from the bank at mile 246.5. Based on the charted depth of the obstruction and the water level recorded at the USGS river gage at Baton Rouge, the depth at the site at the time of the grounding was likely about 7.8 feet. The draft of the *John M. Donnelly* was 9.5 feet. Although the green buoy marking the edge of the channel near the obstruction was missing at the time of the grounding, the location of the obstruction was visible as an area of shallow water on the *John M Donnelly*'s ECS. Nevertheless, the pilot did not identify the hazard ahead as he maneuvered the tow toward the bank to make room for the stopped and downbound tows, and, as a result, the towing vessel grounded.

3 Conclusions

3.1 Probable Cause

The National Transportation Safety Board determines that the probable cause of the grounding of the towing vessel *John M Donnelly* on a submerged obstruction in the Mississippi River was the pilot not identifying the hazard posed by the charted obstruction during low water conditions while maneuvering his tow to avoid other tows.

Vessel Particulars

Vessel	*John M Donnelly*
NTSB vessel group	Towing/Barge
Owner/operator	Ingram Barge Company LLC (Commercial)
Flag	United States
Port of registry	St. Louis, Missouri
Year built	1980
Official number	621298
IMO number	N/A
Classification society	American Bureau of Shipping (third-party organization)
Length (overall)	185.5 ft (56.5 m)
Breadth (max.)	50 ft (15.2 m)
Draft (casualty)	9.5 ft (2.9 m)
Tonnage	1,119 GRT
Engine power; manufacturer	3 x 3,070 h (2,289 kW); EMD 16-645E7BA diesel engines

NTSB investigators worked closely with our counterparts from **Coast Guard Marine Safety Unit Baton Rouge** throughout this investigation.