December 10, 2025 MIR-25-44

Flooding and Sinking of Towing Vessel *Cajole*

On June 12, 2024, about 1530 local time, the towing vessel *Cajole* was upbound the Lower Mississippi River near Waggaman, Louisiana, when the vessel began flooding (see figure 1 and figure 2).[1] The two crewmembers aboard attempted to pump out the vessel but were unsuccessful. They tied off to a nearby barge and evacuated to a Good Samaritan vessel. The *Cajole* later sank. There were no injuries, and a sheen was reported. Damage was estimated at $2 million.

Figure 1. *Cajole* underway on an unknown date before the sinking. (Source: marinetraffic.com, Mark Haury)

[1] (a) In this report, all times are central daylight time, and all miles are statute miles. (b) Visit ntsb.gov to find additional information in the public docket for this NTSB investigation (case no. DCA24FM046). Use the CAROL Query to search investigations.

Casualty Summary	
Casualty type	Flooding/Hull Failure
Location	Lower Mississippi River, mile 112, Waggaman, Louisiana 29°57.77′ N, 090°14.35′ W
Date	June 12, 2024
Time	1530 central daylight time (coordinated universal time –5 hrs)
Persons on board	2
Injuries	None
Property damage	$2 million
Environmental damage	Sheen on water, 4,277 gal diesel fuel recovered (est. fuel capacity 5,000 gal)
Weather	Visibility 7 mi, partly cloudy, winds east-northeast 7 kts, air temperature 91°F
Waterway information	River width 2,100 ft, depth 33 ft, current est. 2 kts

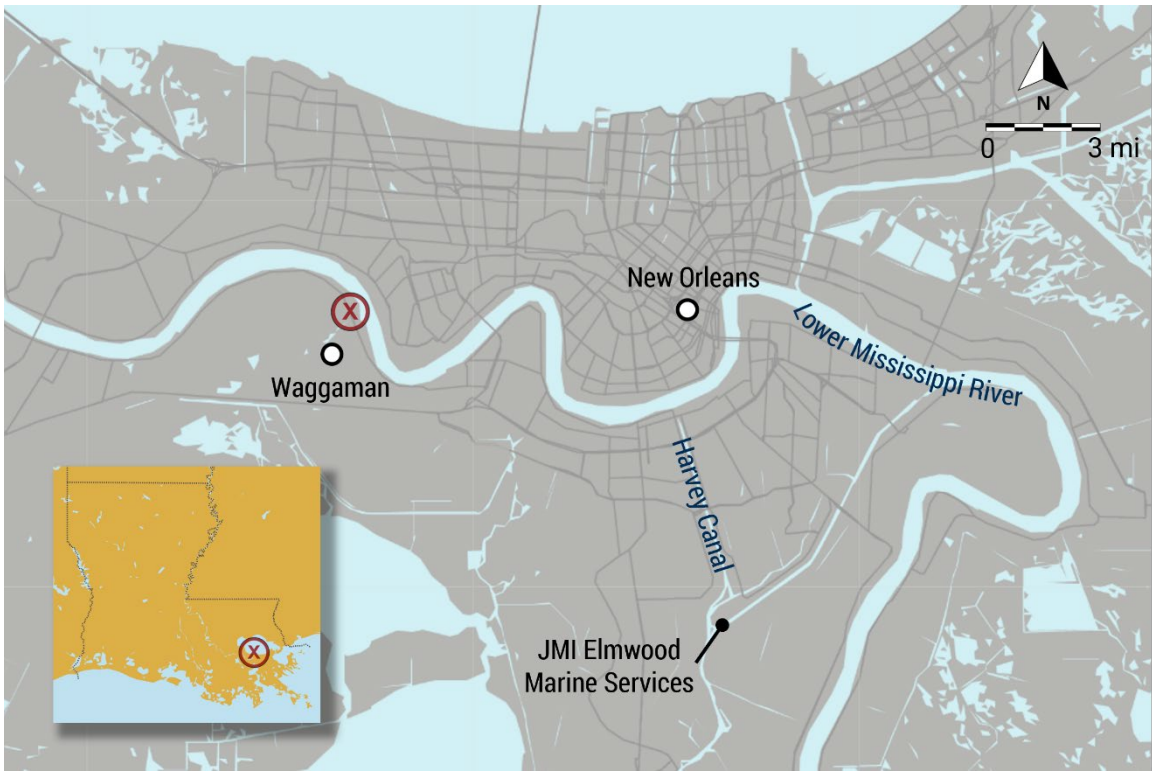

Figure 2. Area where the *Cajole* flooding occurred, as indicated by a circled *X*. (Background source: Google Maps)

1 Factual Information

1.1 Background

The 61-foot-long *Cajole* was a towing vessel constructed in 1978 of welded steel. It was owned by SCF Fleeting and operated by Weber Marine, both wholly owned subsidiaries of Ingram Barge Company. SCF Fleeting acquired the vessel in February 2024. At the time of the casualty, the *Cajole* had a valid US Coast Guard-issued certificate of inspection (COI) documenting compliance with Title 46 *Code of Federal Regulations* Subchapter M.

Vessel propulsion was provided by twin propellers each driven by a 600-hp diesel engine. There were two free hanging plate-type main rudders located aft of each propeller and two flanking rudders forward of each propeller.

The vessel's main deck consisted of the galley, berthing spaces, and upper level of the engine room. Below the main deck, there was a forward bow void, an auxiliary void, the lower level of the engine room, fuel tanks, potable water tanks, and the aft steering void. Flush-mounted hatches on the main deck provided access to the voids. The *Cajole*'s raised wheelhouse was on stilts mounted to the deck housing the engine exhaust stacks.

The *Cajole* was outfitted with a bilge alarm system with float switches located in the engine room and the auxiliary void (the space forward of the engine room). There were two fixed bilge pumps located on the forward starboard side of the engine room.

Two sections of 4-inch diameter open-ended steel pipe penetrated the bulkhead between the auxiliary void and engine room, and one 4-inch-diameter steel pipe penetrated the bulkhead between the auxiliary space and bow void. The open-ended pipes (serving as conduits) allowed vessel piping and electrical wire runs to pass through athwartship bulkheads separating the spaces. The openings were about 6–12 inches beneath the main deck near the outboard longitudinal bulkheads (see figure 3).

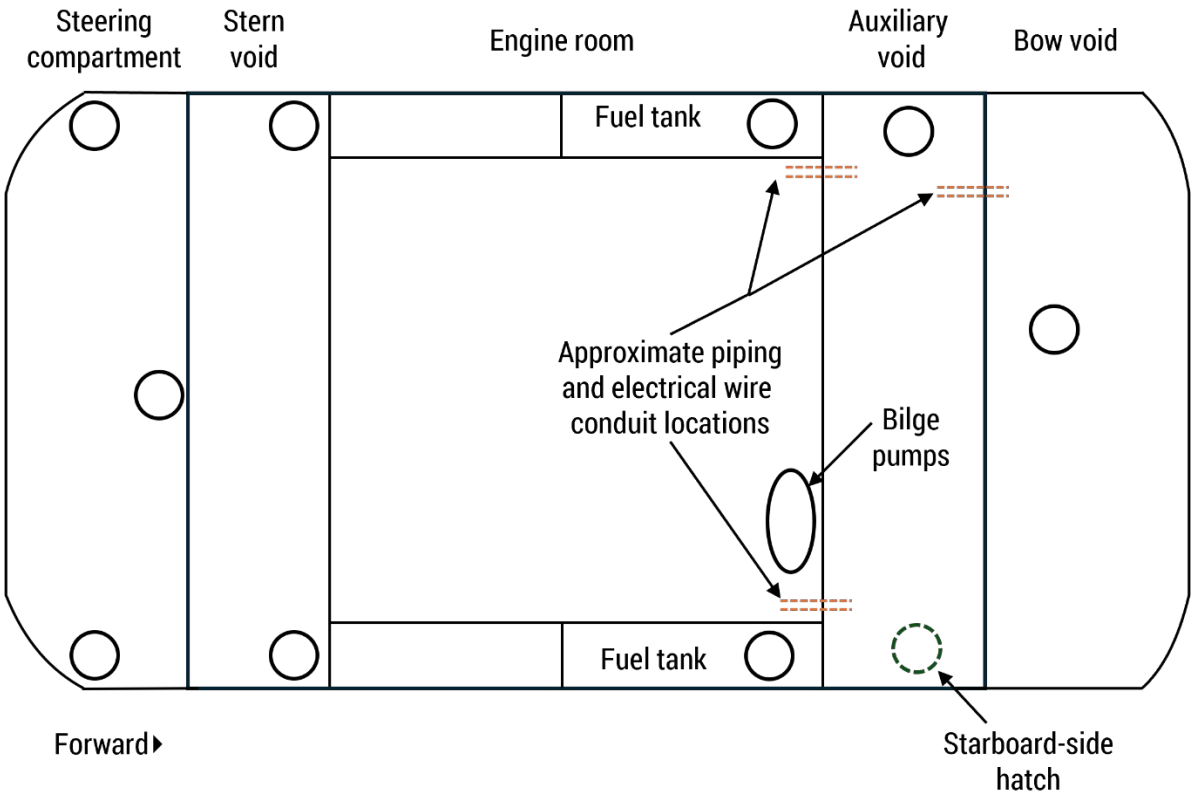

Figure 3. Simplified *Cajole* below deck arrangement with approximate conduit locations indicated with orange dashes and approximate locations of flush-mounted main deck hatches shown as circles

1.2 Event Sequence

Beginning on March 29, 2024, the *Cajole* spent 2 months in a scheduled drydock period for routine maintenance at JMI Elmwood shipyard on the Harvey Canal, in Belle Chasse, Louisiana. During this time, steel repairs to the hull were completed, and the US Coast Guard completed examinations and inspections required to issue the vessel a COI (see section 1.3.2).

On June 12, a crew of two, consisting of a captain and a deckhand, arrived at the shipyard. The crew that had been on board departed before their arrival. The company did not provide any information to the crew about the work completed in shipyard.

The captain and deckhand prepared to get underway. Preparations included completing the "pre-vessel voyage and navigation checklist." Additionally, the captain conducted a "little walkaround" of the vessel and recalled that he "didn't notice anything abnormal prior to leaving the shipyard." After the crew completed

these preparations, about 0630, the vessel departed the shipyard with the captain at the helm, transiting north in the Harvey Canal, bound for Weber Marine in Convent, Louisiana.

Between departure and 0745, the captain received an alarm on the bridge. The captain could not recall the nature of the alarm. He silenced the alarm and continued navigating the vessel.

About 0745, the *Cajole* transited Harvey Lock, turned to port, and proceeded upbound on the Mississippi River. Over the next 3-4 hours, the vessel continued at speeds between 3 and 8.5 knots, averaging about 5 knots. Throughout the voyage, to accommodate vessel traffic, the *Cajole* crossed the river, first crossing to the right descending bank, then the left descending bank.[2] At 1102, the vessel again crossed the river to the right descending bank, turning sharply to port, with the starboard side of the vessel exposed to the current.

According to the captain, about 3-4 hours after transiting Harvey Lock, the "bow was getting heavy," and the vessel "lost speed" near mile 113. The automatic identification system (AIS) data showed that the vessel's speed decreased gradually as the *Cajole* was underway in the river. About 1245, the *Cajole* stopped at mile 113 and tied off to a barge at the Azalea fleeting area.

In an effort to determine the cause of the vessel feeling bow-heavy and losing speed, the captain and the deckhand began opening the flush-mounted deck hatches to inspect the voids. They began with the bow void and found it was dry. The captain entered the engine room and noticed water pouring into the space from the starboard corner of the lower engine room, forward. He told investigators water was entering the space about 3 feet away from the generator where there was "a four-inch hole [conduit] where they can run pipe and cables through."

The vessel had a portable dewatering pump located in the galley; however, it did not have any fuel. He called the port engineer, who instructed him to turn on the bilge pump in the engine room. The captain turned on the pump and called a nearby towing vessel fleet via VHF radio for assistance.

The towing vessel *Robert* arrived about 1252 and provided two portable dewatering pumps, and about 25 minutes later, the towing vessel *Mary Parker* arrived with two additional pumps. The captain used these pumps to attempt to pump out

[2] The inland towing industry refers to the shorelines of Western Rivers as the left and right banks when traveling (facing) downriver. The left bank is called the left descending bank, and the right bank is called the right descending bank.

water from both sides of the auxiliary void (two on the starboard side and two on the port side). However, even with the four pumps running, water continued to flood the engine room, so the captain moved two of the pumps into the engine room and ran them in that space. According to the captain, at this time, the water was "a little more than around shin deep" in the engine room. The captain and deckhand sought refuge on board the *Mary Parker*. The vessel, now partially submerged, remained tied to the barge at the Azalea fleeting area (see figure 4).

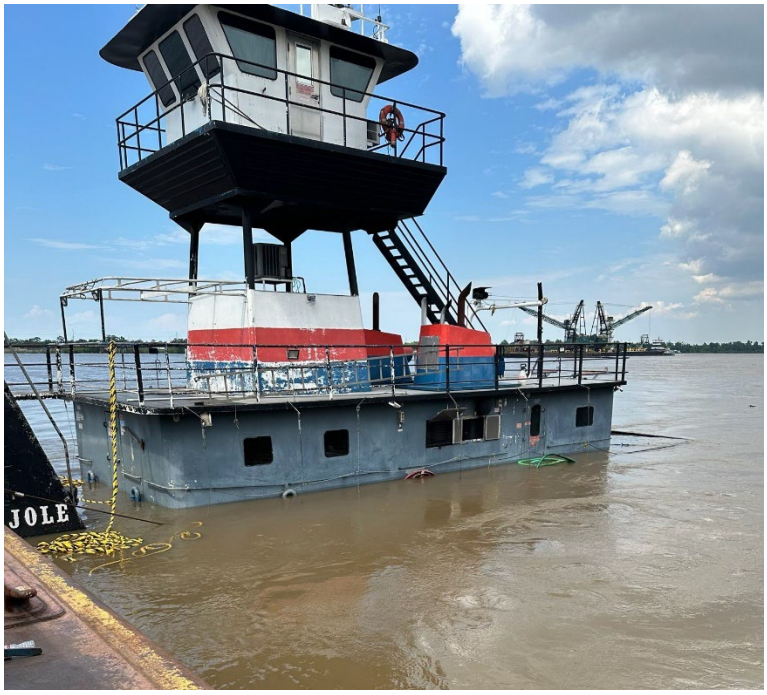

Figure 4. *Cajole* partially submerged and secured to a barge after all involved personnel safely disembarked the vessel. (Source: Coast Guard)

The captain notified the operating company's operations manager of the situation and informed him that everyone was safe. By 2100, the *Cajole* had fully sunk.

1.3 Additional Information

1.3.1 Damage

On June 14, a salvage team arrived. Salvors worked for 4 days to refloat the vessel and dewater the void spaces; salvage and dewatering was complete on June 18. According to the salvor, 4,277 gallons of fuel were recovered.[3] The vessel

[3] The vessel's fuel tanks could hold up to 5,000 gallons of diesel fuel. However, the amount of fuel in the tanks at the time of the casualty could not be determined.

was cleared by the Coast Guard to be relocated to Verret Shipyard in Baton Rouge, Louisiana, on June 20.

The sinking damaged the *Cajole*'s main propulsion engines and generators, as well as its electrical and hydraulic systems beyond repair. Salvors made temporary repairs to keep the vessel afloat, including welding a replacement cover over the auxiliary space starboard-side flush-mounted hatch on the main deck to ensure watertight integrity as the vessel was towed to the shipyard for repair (see figure 5). (The hatch cover was lost during the casualty, but according to the captain, it was in place when he discovered the flooding in the engine room.)

Figure 5. *Cajole* after the sinking, with starboard side auxiliary void access hatch cover replaced and permanently sealed to the main deck for transit to shipyard.

1.3.2 Inspections

On May 28, about 2 weeks before the sinking, Coast Guard inspectors, with an operating company representative present, attended the vessel while it was in shipyard drydock to conduct an internal structural examination and credit drydock examination. The inspectors entered the void spaces "to inspect for watertight integrity and structural member integrity," as well as to check the repair of an insert on the hull. The repair was tested and found to be satisfactory.

During this inspection, the Coast Guard noted that the piping for the bilge suction in the forward void was replaced and required testing. They also found piping

and electrical wire conduits between the forward auxiliary space and engine room that were not properly sealed and watertight (see figure 6). Company personnel sealed the piping and electrical wire conduits before the inspector's departure, and this was not recorded as a deficiency. The inspector told investigators that he received photos showing what he believed were the sealed conduits. He informed the operating company that the repairs were satisfactory. At that time, according to the inspector, the auxiliary space was sealed. No deficiencies were issued in this inspection, and the COI examination was scheduled for June 4, 2024.

Figure 6. View of unsealed conduit penetration between the engine room and auxiliary space from the auxiliary space on May 28, 2024. (Source: Coast Guard)

On June 4, Coast Guard inspectors attended the *Cajole* at the shipyard to complete the COI examination. The COI inspector did not enter the auxiliary void to verify the sealed conduits.

The inspection resulted in four deficiencies:

- Air starter inoperable when starting starboard engine
- Crew could not conduct drills due to inoperable air starter
- Fire pump gauge broke and fire main leaking
- Inoperable pilothouse alarms for engine rpm, oil pressure, and jacket water

The operating company was instructed to diagnose the cause of the inoperable equipment and plan for repairs. In the inspection summary, the Coast Guard inspector noted that the "vessel is not fit for its current route and service. Did not issue Temp COI."

On June 7, a third-party company conducted a "sensor test/alarm system" test on board the *Cajole*. The following systems were marked as "ok" by the individual conducting the tests: port and starboard generator day tank, port and starboard main engine day tank, port and starboard main engine oil pressure, port and starboard main engine water temperature, port and starboard gear oil pressure, low hydraulic oil level, and the bilge system.

When a Coast Guard inspector attended the vessel again on June 11, a vessel representative confirmed that they replaced the air starter on the engine. The inspectors verified the gauge on the fire pump and the operation of visual and audible alarms for the vessel systems involved. The inspector stated that the bilge alarms in the engine room and in the wheelhouse were very loud, although it was not listed on the inspection summary. The crew conducted man overboard and firefighting drills, found to be satisfactory to the inspectors. They cleared the deficiencies, and the vessel was issued a temporary COI.

1.3.3 Personnel

The captain of the *Cajole* held a valid Coast Guard-issued merchant marine credential as a master of towing vessels upon Great Lakes, inland waters, and Western Rivers. He had about 13 years of experience as a mariner and had been employed by the company for about 2 months. The casualty voyage was the captain's first time on board the *Cajole*.

The *Cajole* deckhand did not hold any credentials. Due to the vessel's route and tonnage, and in compliance with the Coast Guard-issued COI, the requirements for deckhand were met by completion of a company safety orientation outlining emergency/safety procedures and enrolling in a drug testing program. He had about 3 years of experience as a deckhand and had been employed by the company for about 2 months at the time of the casualty.

Following the casualty, the captain and the deckhand were tested for drugs, with negative results. The 96-hour work/rest logs showed adequate rest periods for both crew members.

2 Analysis

While transiting the Lower Mississippi River, the towing vessel *Cajole* flooded and sank after taking on water near mile 113.

Partway through the transit, the captain reported that the vessel was losing speed; he later entered the engine room and saw water entering the engine room space from the forward starboard corner near a bulkhead penetration (conduit). There were two spaces forward of the engine room's forward bulkhead: the auxiliary space and bow void. After the towboat was salvaged, investigators found no hull damage that would have allowed water ingress into these spaces. According to the captain, the cover on an access hatch to the starboard-side auxiliary void was in place when he discovered the flooding in the engine room. The cover was lost during the casualty, so investigators were not able to evaluate its condition. The hatch was flush to the main deck, and with the vessel's low freeboard, would have made it easy for water to enter if the cover was compromised or not sealed. It is not uncommon for water to wash over a towing vessel's bow as it transits through a river, especially in lightboat condition, like the *Cajole* when it departed the shipyard. AIS data showed that, about 1102, the captain turned the vessel to port so that the vessel was perpendicular to the river, and the vessel started to slow down soon afterward. This turn exposed the starboard side of the vessel to the river current and could have resulted in water rushing over the starboard side and into any insufficiently sealed seams (degraded gasket or poor hatch fit) or an unsecured hatch cover that partly, or fully, slid off the starboard-side auxiliary void hatch opening. Additionally, although the crew activated the engine room bilge pumps and used four portable pumps from Good Samaritan vessels, the pumps could not keep up with the rate of flooding, which indicates a large opening, such as an access hatch opening, was needed to produce this rate of flooding. Given the lack of other potential sources of ingress, it is likely water entered through a compromised (partly secured, or unsecured and displaced underway) auxiliary void access hatch.

About 2 weeks before the casualty, a Coast Guard inspector found that piping and electrical wire conduits between the forward auxiliary space and engine room were not properly sealed to be watertight. Operating company personnel sealed the piping and electrical wire conduits, and the inspector signed off that the repairs were completed satisfactorily. However, based on the flooding that the captain saw coming through at least one of the conduits, the repairs the crew had made during the Coast Guard inspection were likely not completely effective. With the starboard-side conduit between the engine room and auxiliary void lacking watertight integrity, water was able to progressively flood between the spaces. Therefore, the water in the engine room was likely the result of progressive flooding, through the conduits, from

the auxiliary void located directly forward of the engine room. The flooding added weight to the vessel, causing it to sink lower in the water and decreasing its freeboard, which may have allowed for flooding through other deck or house openings. The vessel's reserve buoyancy was then overcome, resulting in it sinking.

The casualty voyage was both crewmembers' first time on board the *Cajole* after the vessel underwent a shipyard period. The crew did not interface with the previous crew, and while the vessel was similar to other vessels they had worked on, they had very little time to assess the overall status of the vessel or its systems before getting underway. Therefore, when the captain discovered the flooding in the engine room, he was not prepared to address it. While an alarm sounded, the captain did not know what it indicated. The *Cajole*'s portable pump did not have fuel, and because the captain was unfamiliar with the vessel, he was uncertain of what to do in the situation, leading him to call the port engineer for guidance. If the crew had more robust vessel familiarization before getting underway, they may have had a more effective onboard response to the flooding.

3 Conclusions

3.1 Probable Cause

The National Transportation Safety Board determines that the probable cause of the flooding and sinking of the towing vessel *Cajole* was likely a compromised flush-mounted access hatch, which allowed water to flood into a forward void space, and unsealed penetrations in a transverse bulkhead, which allowed for progressive flooding aft into the engine room.

3.2 Lessons Learned

Sealing Watertight Bulkhead Penetrations

For the safety of a vessel and all on board, the integrity of the hull and watertight bulkheads must be maintained, and any deficiencies must be appropriately addressed. Issues with watertight integrity, including unsealed watertight bulkhead and deck penetrations and deck and hull plate wastage, need to be addressed by permanent means. The Coast Guard advises, "Ensure electrical cables and conduits, piping runs, remote valve actuators, and other components that penetrate watertight bulkheads, decks, and compartments are inspected frequently and properly maintained. Each may have a unique sealing method involving glands with packing assemblies, penetration seals, or other methods. Frequent inspection and proper maintenance of these various fittings and assemblies will assist in minimizing the possibility of progressive flooding."[4]

[4] Coast Guard, "Maintaining Vessel Watertight Integrity," Marine Safety Alert 1-08, May 9, 2008.

Vessel Particulars

Vessel	*Cajole*
Type	Towing/Barge (Towing vessel)
Owner/Operator	SCF Fleeting/Weber Marine (Commercial)
Flag	United States
Port of registry	Baton Rouge, Louisiana
Year built	1978
Official number (US)	600216
IMO number	N/A
Classification society	N/A
Length (overall)	64.0 ft (19.5 m)
Breadth (max.)	23.0 ft (7.0 m)
Draft (casualty)	6.5 ft (1.9 m)
Tonnage	96 GRT
Engine power; manufacturer	2 x 600 hp (447 kW); Cummins KTA19 diesel engines

NTSB investigators worked closely with our counterparts from **Coast Guard Sector New Orleans** throughout this investigation.