

September 18, 2026

MIR-26-30

Grounding of Fishing Vessel *Mystery*

On December 10, 2024, about 2121 local time, the fishing vessel *Mystery* was transiting the Unga Strait along the Aleutian Peninsula with three crewmembers on board when the vessel grounded and flooded near Seal Cape, about 25 miles west of Sand Point, Alaska (see figure 1 and figure 2).¹ The crewmembers were rescued from the vessel by the US Coast Guard. Up to 2,080 gallons of fuel and lube oil were on board the vessel. No injuries were reported. The vessel, plus gear, was a total loss, valued at \$950,000.



Figure 1. The *Mystery* underway at an unknown date. (Source: Millennium Marine)

¹ (a) In this report, all times are Alaska standard time, and all miles are nautical miles (1.15 statute miles) unless otherwise noted. (b) Visit [ntsb.gov](https://www.ntsb.gov) to find additional information in the [public docket](#) for this NTSB investigation (case no. DCA25FM011). Use the [CAROL Query](#) to search investigations.

Casualty Summary

NTSB casualty category	Grounding/Stranding
Location	Near Seal Cape, about 25 miles west of Sand Point, Alaska 55°21.40' N, 161°15.00' W
Date	December 10, 2024
Time	2121 Alaska standard time (coordinated universal time –9 hrs)
Persons on board	3
Injuries	None
Property damage	\$800,000 (vessel); \$150,000 (gear)
Environmental damage	None reported; est. 2,000 gallons of diesel fuel, 30 gallons of lube oil, and 50 gallons of other fuel on board
Weather	Visibility 10 mi, overcast, winds 020° at 20 kts, seas 1 ft, air temperature 39°F, water temperature 39°F, sunset 1713
Waterway information	Strait; width 7 nm, depth 42-300 ft, low tide 0400



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

1 Factual Information

1.1 Background

The 49-foot-long commercial fishing vessel *Mystery* was constructed of fiberglass (fiber-reinforced plastic) and built by Millennium Marine in Escuminac, New Brunswick, Canada, in 2006. The owner operated the *Mystery* out of Homer, Alaska. The *Mystery*'s engine room was located aft. Propulsion was provided by two Isuzu UM6HK1Z2 diesel engines, each rated 300 hp (224 kilowatts) and connected to a fixed-pitch propeller. The steering system had two rudders, positioned behind the propellers. The vessel was equipped with a chart plotter, which was connected to an autopilot steering system. The vessel was also outfitted with two radars and two magnetic compasses.

The vessel had a fuel capacity of 2,000 gallons and cargo capacity of 75,000 pounds. The vessel's last Coast Guard commercial fishing vessel dockside exam was on March 9, 2023.² The dockside exam verified the presence and adequate condition of required lifesaving and safety gear (a six-person liferaft and five survival suits). The vessel was rigged for long-line fishing.

1.2 Event Sequence

On December 8, 2024, the *Mystery* began a planned 5-day transit from Dutch Harbor, Alaska—where the crew had unloaded catch after a fishing trip—back to Homer. Three crewmembers were on board (the captain, who owned the vessel, and two deckhands). On December 9 and 10, a gale warning was in effect for the Pavlof Islands, the area the vessel was transiting. Rain was also forecasted, and southeasterly 35-knot winds had been observed.

On December 10, the third day of the transit, the captain navigated the vessel through various straits around the Pavlof Islands. Rather than steering the vessel directly from the helm, the captain relied on the autopilot to steer.³ He would enter waypoints into the onboard chart plotter for each leg of the voyage, and the plotter

² Under the Coast Guard Authorization Act of 2010, commercial fishing vessel dockside safety examinations are required once every 5 years for fishing vessels that operate 3 miles beyond shore. These examinations help ensure that all the required safety equipment and systems on board are in serviceable condition; examinations do not include the hull, electrical systems, or machinery as required for Coast Guard-inspected vessels.

³ The captain did not report whether he had used the vessel's radars or compasses.

would transmit a heading to steer to the autopilot steering system. This would allow the vessel to maintain the course between the waypoints.

Before retiring to his bunk for the night, the captain turned the watch over to deckhand 1 (the captain's son); deckhand 2 was also present. Deckhand 1 continued using the chart plotter (the waypoints were not changed) and the autopilot after taking over the watch from the captain. Deckhand 1 reported that "everything was fine" on his watch. About 2030, deckhand 1 left the wheelhouse to take a break, leaving deckhand 2 as the sole watch in the wheelhouse. During his watch, deckhand 2 also used the chart plotter, with the previously programmed waypoints, and the autopilot to steer.

About 2100, the captain, who was still below deck, noticed a change in the vessel's movement. The captain began heading to the wheelhouse to investigate. While moving through the galley, he encountered deckhand 1, who followed him. Before the captain or deckhand 1 reached the wheelhouse, the vessel grounded on rocks.

The captain reached the wheelhouse as the vessel rose and fell with the swells onto the rocks several times. The *Mystery* then crossed a reef and grounded again on shore, 3 miles east of Seal Cape, before losing electrical power and propulsion. The captain stated that a "water alarm went off" in the wheelhouse. (Investigators later determined that a bilge pump indicator was located on the helm.) The captain went to the engine room and verified that it was flooding.⁴

Before going to the engine room, the captain had noted the chart plotter screen was frozen and showed the time when the *Mystery* was abeam Seal Cape Light, about 15 to 20 minutes before the vessel initially grounded.⁵ Deckhand 1 reported that he had not noticed the plotter screen being frozen during his watch. The plotted course would have taken the vessel about 0.8 miles south of the light. (Figure 3 shows the chart plotter after it had been reset, including the location where the vessel grounded and the approximate direction of travel.)

⁴ The crewmembers' witness statements did not indicate the actions deckhand 1 or deckhand 2 took after the captain reached the wheelhouse.

⁵ Seal Cape Light (Light List no. 27130) was a 75-foot-tall skeleton tower on the southern tip of the island about 0.8 miles from the vessel's plotted course. Coast Guard maintenance records from November 2023 documented loose and corroded foundation studs, a broken corner post, and a significant lean; they recommended the tower be rebuilt. On December 12, 2024, two days after the grounding, the Coast Guard surveyed the Seal Cape Light and found the structure destroyed and the light extinguished. As of the date of this report, the Seal Cape Light has yet to be repaired.

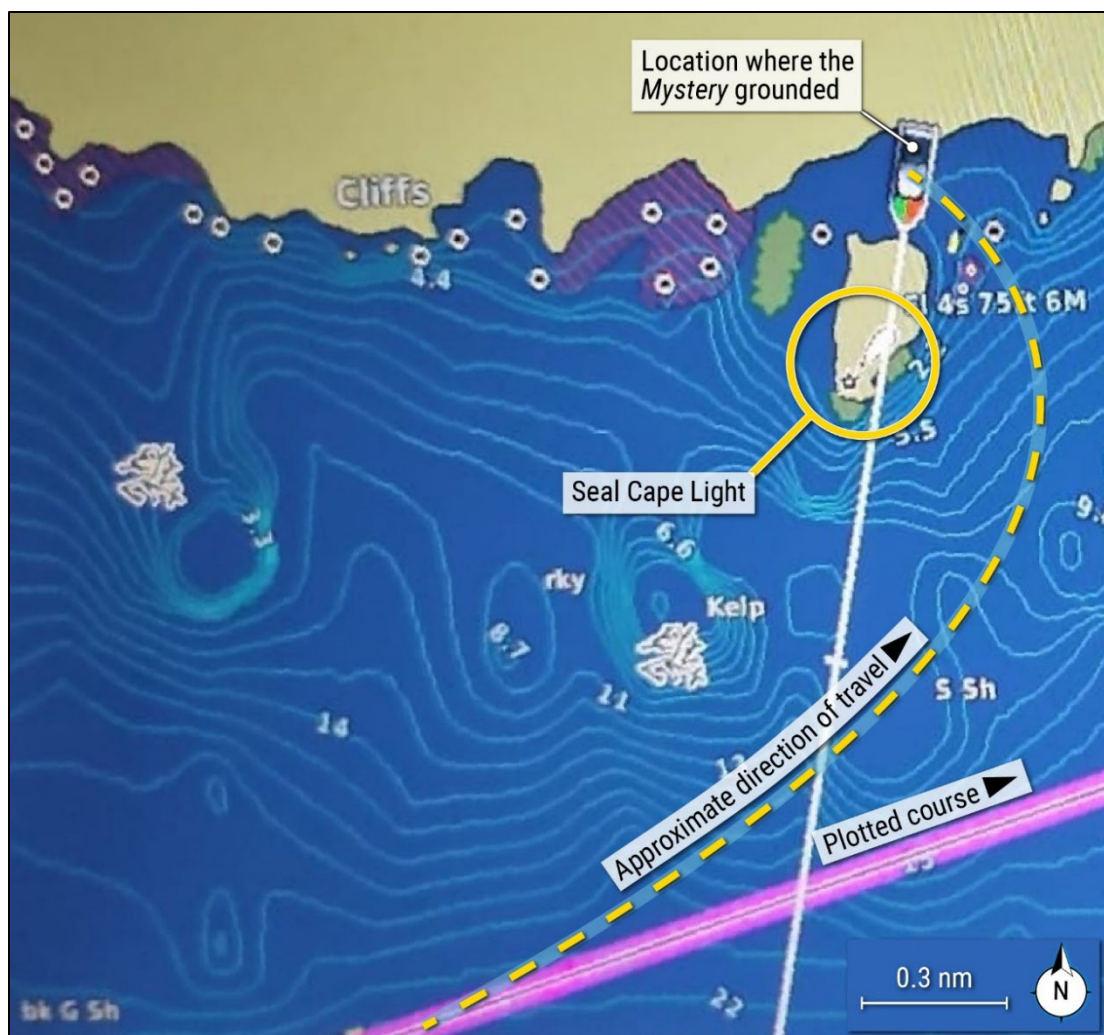


Figure 3. The *Mystery*'s chart plotter, taken after the unit was reset, showing the plotted course (magenta line, lower right) and the location where the vessel grounded. Annotations indicate the former location of the Seal Cape Light and the vessel's approximate direction of travel (dashed line). (Background source: *Mystery* captain)

After the vessel grounded ashore, the three crewmembers donned immersion (survival) suits and prepared to deploy the liferaft (stowed aft of the wheelhouse) to abandon ship. The captain then sent a picture of the frozen chart plotter screen (which showed the vessel's location at the time it had frozen) to his wife via satellite internet connection, asking her to call the Coast Guard.

At 2121, Joint Rescue Coordination Center Juneau received a distress signal from the emergency position indicating radio beacon (EPIRB) registered to the *Mystery*. (The vessel's EPIRB was mounted outside on the starboard wheelhouse bulkhead, aft. Crewmembers did not report to investigators how the EPIRB was activated.) The Coast Guard contacted the captain's wife, the registered point of

contact for the EPIRB, reaching her at 2125. She told the Coast Guard that her husband had sent a distress notification with the *Mystery*'s location via text, stating that the vessel had grounded and the three crewmembers on board were preparing to abandon ship.

Meanwhile, a crewmember called Coast Guard Sector Puget Sound (Washington), and, at 2142, Joint Rescue Coordination Center Juneau was patched into the call. The crewmember shared the *Mystery*'s location with the Coast Guard and reported that the vessel had grounded, the engine room had flooded, the crew had donned immersion suits, and they had a liferaft ready to deploy in case they needed to abandon the vessel.

Following the EPIRB alert and phone call, the Coast Guard issued an urgent marine information broadcast and launched a C-130 fixed-wing aircraft and an MH-60 helicopter from Air Station Kodiak.

On December 11, at 0243, the MH-60 arrived on scene and lowered a rescue swimmer onto the vessel. All three *Mystery* crewmembers were hoisted aboard the MH-60 and taken to Sand Point, where they were met by emergency medical services.

1.3 Additional Information

1.3.1 Damage

The captain told investigators that when the tide receded and while the crew was waiting for rescue, the crew saw at least three 1-foot diameter holes in the hull in the engine room and the adjacent passageway. The captain also thought the struts supporting the propeller shafts had been forced up through the hull. The *Mystery* was deemed a total loss and was abandoned at the grounding site (see figure 4).



Figure 4. The *Mystery* (circled) aground as seen from the former location of the Seal Cape Light on January 16, 2025. (Background source: Coast Guard)

1.3.2 Crew Experience

The captain had over 20 years of experience, fishing from Mexico to Alaska. Deckhand 2 had at least 25 years of experience and fished with his own vessel. Deckhand 1's navigational experience was unavailable.

1.3.3 Chart Plotter

The captain reported that the *Mystery*'s chart plotter had frozen on previous occasions. He reported that when the chart plotter froze, the autopilot would slowly turn the vessel to port, as he believed it had on the evening of the grounding. The captain noted that he had never experienced issues with the autopilot. He stated that the freezing issue could be corrected by rebooting the chart plotter. Due to similar freezing issues on previously installed chart plotters from the same manufacturer, the captain had replaced the plotter unit twice since the vessel's construction, most recently in 2018 or 2019.

According to the chart plotter manufacturer, the company "periodically releases system software updates for marine equipment. Software updates help

maintain device functionality, [and] provides [sic] added features and compatibilities to new products.” Investigators confirmed that the owner had registered an account with the manufacturer, but he had not registered the specific chart plotter model with the company and had never downloaded any software updates. The manufacturer released several software updates, and the release notes for one software update, released in June 2021, stated that it fixed “a potential issue where GPS position, heading, and speed could stop updating correctly after several hours of use.” However, because the vessel was abandoned, investigators could not determine which software version was installed on the *Mystery*’s chart plotter, which had been replaced 5-6 years before the casualty.

2 Analysis

While the fishing vessel *Mystery* was transiting northeast along the Aleutian Peninsula, about 25 miles west of Sand Point, Alaska, in autopilot, the vessel struck submerged rocks, grounded ashore, and began taking on water.

On the day of the casualty, the *Mystery*'s captain navigated by entering waypoints into the chart plotter, with the autopilot steering the vessel to the waypoints on each leg of the voyage. Deckhand 1 (and later, deckhand 2) continued to use the waypoints entered by the captain and the autopilot steering system when they took the watch after the captain that evening. After the *Mystery* grounded, the captain noted that the chart plotter screen had frozen about 15 to 20 minutes earlier and remained in that state. The autopilot, which the captain stated had never had issues, likely functioned properly. However, the captain stated that the chart plotter, which the autopilot relied on for a heading to steer, would occasionally freeze, after which the autopilot would slowly turn the vessel to port. Therefore, on the night of the grounding, the chart plotter froze, and, consequently, the autopilot steered the vessel to port.

A proper navigation watch requires a watchstander to confirm and correlate information from all available sources, including electronic charts and visual sightings, to verify the vessel's position. For the *Mystery* crew, maintaining a proper navigation watch was critical given their operational environment (on a lee shore, with high winds, and in reduced visibility due to darkness). Vessels navigating near shore face increased risk from the proximity to navigation hazards. As such, any error in navigation, steering, or propulsion can quickly result in catastrophe. Coastwise navigation, therefore, requires increased vigilance to maintain a continuous and proper navigation watch—particularly while navigating in conditions like those on the night of the casualty.

Deckhand 2's solo watch began about 30 minutes before the grounding. Based on the captain's photo of the chart plotter, which showed the system had frozen about 15 to 20 minutes before the grounding, the chart plotter malfunctioned during deckhand 2's watch. However, deckhand 2 was unaware of the frozen screen, indicating he was not actively monitoring the vessel's transit on the chart plotter. Therefore, deckhand 2 was not maintaining a proper navigation watch. (The Seal Cape Light, which should have been abeam the *Mystery*, was destroyed and extinguished at an unknown date between a November 2023 Coast Guard survey and the date of the grounding. Had the light been present, it may have visually alerted the deckhand of the *Mystery*'s proximity to shore as the vessel turned toward land.)

Reduced vigilance and not actively monitoring automated systems can be caused by automation-related complacency. Automation-related complacency can affect operators of automated systems, resulting in the operators becoming over-reliant on these systems and trusting that they will behave as expected, leading to less frequent checks and monitoring.⁶ As a result, the human operator is less likely to detect signs of unexpected system behavior involving the automated processes—such as the chart plotter freezing.

The NTSB has found overreliance on automated systems to be the cause of, or a contributing factor in, several other accidents.⁷ Although the circumstances of these accidents vary, all the accidents involved an operator or crewmember relying on an automated system immediately before the respective accident. While the use of automated systems benefits operators by reducing their workloads, it does not relieve an operator of his or her responsibility to remain vigilant.

⁶ R. Parasuraman and D.H. Manzey, "Complacency and Bias in Human Use of Automation: An Attentional Integration," *Human Factors* 52, no. 3 (2010): 381–410.

⁷ For marine safety accident investigations, see [*Collision between Containership MSC Rita and Fishing Vessel Tremont 55 miles southeast of Chincoteague, Virginia, October 22, 2022, MIR-23-27*](#), and [*Grounding and Sinking of Fishing Vessel Sage Catherine Lane near Cumberland Island, Georgia, June 9, 2021, MIR-22/14*](#). For highway safety accident investigations, see [*Partial Automation Investigations*](#). For examples of aviation safety accident investigations, see [*Scandinavian Airlines System, DC-10-30, John F. Kennedy International Airport, Jamaica, New York, February 28, 1984, AAR-84/15*](#); [*Northwest Airlines, Inc., McDonnell Douglas DC-982, N312RC, Detroit Metropolitan Wayne County Airport, Romulus, Michigan, August 16, 1987, AAR-88/05*](#); and [*Descent Below Visual Glidepath and Impact With Seawall Asiana Airlines Flight 214 Boeing 777-200ER, HL7742 San Francisco, California, July 6, 2013, AAR-14/10*](#).

3 Conclusions

3.1 Probable Cause

The National Transportation Safety Board determines that the probable cause of the grounding of the fishing vessel *Mystery* was the deckhand on watch not maintaining a proper navigation watch, likely due to his overreliance on the vessel's automated navigation systems, which resulted in him not noticing when the chart plotter malfunctioned and the autopilot steered the vessel away from its plotted course.

3.2 Lessons Learned

Overreliance on Automated Navigation Systems

Although modern technology is an asset, it is not infallible. Operator overreliance on, and overconfidence in, technologies like chart plotters and autopilot systems can negatively affect situation awareness. The safety of a vessel underway depends on the crew's awareness of the vessel's position and adherence to a voyage plan. Good seamanship requires correlating information from all means of navigation, including satellite, radar, and visual aids to navigation. Operators should ensure crewmembers navigating the vessel are familiar with electronic charting and autopilot steering systems, regularly crosscheck their position, and can recognize when technologies are not functioning as expected so the crewmembers can respond appropriately.

Vessel Particulars

Vessel	<i>Mystery</i>
NTSB vessel group	Fishing (Fishing vessel)
Owner/Operator	Private
Flag	United States
Port of registry	Homer, Alaska
Year built	2006
Official number	AK7804AG (US)
IMO number	N/A
Classification society	N/A
Length (overall)	51.6 ft (15.7m)
Breadth (max.)	18.8 ft (5.7 m)
Draft (casualty)	5.0 ft (1.5 m)
Tonnage	40 GRT
Engine power; manufacturer	2 × 300 hp (224 kW); Isuzu UM6HK1WM-AB2 inline 6-cylinder diesel engines

NTSB investigators worked closely with our counterparts from **Coast Guard Sector Western Alaska and US Arctic** throughout this investigation.

The National Transportation Safety Board (NTSB) is an independent federal agency charged by Congress with investigating every civil aviation accident in the United States and significant events in other modes of transportation—railroad, transit, highway, marine, pipeline, and commercial space. We determine the probable cause of the accidents and events we investigate, and issue safety recommendations aimed at preventing future occurrences. In addition, we conduct transportation safety research studies and offer information and other assistance to family members and survivors for any accident or event investigated by the agency. We also serve as the appellate authority for enforcement actions involving aviation and mariner certificates issued by the Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) and US Coast Guard, and we adjudicate appeals of civil penalty actions taken by the FAA.

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For more detailed background information on this report, visit the [NTSB Case Analysis and Reporting Online \(CAROL\) website](#) and search for NTSB accident ID DCA25FM011. Recent publications are available in their entirety on the [NTSB website](#). Other information about available publications also may be obtained from the website or by contacting—

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