

Enchantress: Eyesore or landmark?



The Enchantress, a 64-year-old tugboat, sits partially submerged in Fidalgo Bay in October 2007. Lead paint and other toxic materials have placed the tug high on the state Department of Ecology's cleanup list.
Photo by Scott Terrell

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ANACORTES — Eight years after the Enchantress was abandoned in Fidalgo Bay, local and state agencies are preparing to remove the decaying wooden tug, but one man hopes he can save her.

The 64-year-old Enchantress — considered by some a landmark and by others an eyesore — rests in Fidalgo Bay where she's lodged between old pilings. At least one of the decomposing posts has pierced the tug's oak hull.

Scientists fear that lead paint and other contaminants used in the tug's construction will add to the toxic level in a bay that is already polluted from 120 years of ship building and wood processing. Fidalgo Bay is one of nine bodies of water identified by the state Department of Ecology for accelerated cleanup under the Puget Sound Initiative, a directive from Gov. Chris Gregoire to clean up and restore the health of the Sound by 2020.

Officials with both the Department of Natural Resources and the state Department of Ecology have wanted to remove the 127-foot tug from the bay since Richard Carnes of Sedro-Woolley abandoned her in 2000. Carnes was shot and killed in 2001 over a debt.

Last summer, Ecology began working on finding the money to remove the Enchantress. The tug, which was commissioned during World War II by the Army, is among 17 toxic sites in or near Fidalgo and Padilla bays.

Some people, including local artist and history buff Bill Mitchell, don't want to see the Enchantress go to a landfill.

Mitchell said the Enchantress, which has been known by at least six names, is one of the few remaining Mikimiki tug designs and should remain in the bay and left to decay naturally. The tug has caught the eye of photographers and other artists in the area.

“It is incredibly picturesque,” Mitchell said. “It doesn’t cost anything for her to live there.”

Mitchell said he’s spoken with scuba divers who told him that there is sea life in and near her — a sign Mitchell said indicates the tug is not toxic.

But Sandra Caldwell, an environmental specialist with Ecology’s Toxics Cleanup Program, disagrees. Caldwell, a scientist who oversees Ecology’s program in Fidalgo and Padilla bays, said marine life isn’t growing on the tug’s hull, an indicator that the anti-fouling agents in the vessel’s paint are active and affecting sea life and water quality.

When the boat breaks up, lead from paint and petroleum products remaining in the sections of the engine and machinery that couldn’t be removed in 2000 will leach into the water and the mud of the tidal flats, Caldwell said.

“It’s going to break up pretty soon,” she said.

On Thursday, the Port of Anacortes Board of Commissioners, which is working with Ecology to clean up toxic sites in the bay, could approve funding for a salvager to remove the Enchantress. Ecology will reimburse the Port.

Of the four qualified bids, the lowest and winner was \$237,600 from Global Diving and Salvage of Seattle and Anacortes. The highest bid was \$442,471 from Richard Phillips Marine of Boring, Ore.

The bidders would bring in a barge with a crane and lift the Enchantress in pieces onto the barge, said Connie Thoman, an environmental administrator with the port. Ecology will pay the bill. The tug would be taken to a landfill that deals with hazardous materials.

Even if the Enchantress were not toxic, it would be problematic to leave the tug in the water once cleanup begins of the contaminated tidelands and uplands at the nearby 7.6-acre Custom Plywood Mill site. However, cleanup plans put out for public comment last December have been scrapped because Gilbert Villarreal’s Concorde Group sold the land to GBH Investments, LLC, in Idaho Falls for \$1.6 million. Villarreal’s company had planned to build docks, a boat launch and a ship painting facility there.

Before a salvager can work on the Enchantress, a marine archeologist will need to determine whether the tug is a historically significant vessel, Caldwell said.

“We don’t believe it is, but we’re not the experts,” she said.

The Enchantress, under the designation of LT495, was built in 1944 on Long Island, N.Y., for the Army and launched in November 1944, six months before V-E Day, according to “U.S. Army Ships and Watercrafts of World War II,” by Dave Grover. The Army had 746 tugs during the war to move ships in harbors, tow barges or move supplies.

During World War II, the 127-foot-long and 28-foot-wide tug was manned by the U.S. Coast Guard, according to Marc Sammis, curator at the U.S. Army Transportation Corps Museum in

Fort Eustis, Va.

No specific war record was found, and both the Army and U.S. Navy historians said they assume the tug was sold as surplus.

The Army reportedly sold the Enchantress in 1948 to a Baltimore company, which sold her in 1950 to an Alaskan oil company, according to “The Forgotten Fleet of Sixty-One,” a self-published book by John Benthien. The tug apparently had nine other owners and worked towing loads between Washington and Alaska or around Puget Sound, according to Benthien.

The Enchantress was sold to Carnes in 2000 and brought from Ballard to Anacortes, Mitchell said.

Anacortes Museum Director Steve Oakley said the appeal of the Enchantress is similar to that of old historic barns that people see driving around Skagit County. Oakley said he applauds Mitchell’s efforts to make people aware of the history tug boats have in Puget Sound and in Anacortes. However, the Enchantress wasn’t one of the boats that worked Fidalgo Island waters.

“The museum isn’t in any position to take the boat and restore it,” Oakley said. “It’s too far gone for one thing, and it doesn’t have the long connection with Anacortes that would make it reasonable to invest so much effort and treasure (money) in restoration.”

Greg Griffith, deputy preservation officer for the state Department of Archaeology and Historic Preservation, said even if the Enchantress were “historically significant” — qualifying for the National Register of Historic Places and the state’s Washington Historic Registrar — that wouldn’t save her. Only money and an organized effort would.

Ecology would only be required to document the boat before removal. There have been various efforts to save historic boats in Puget Sound, some more successful than others, Griffith said.

“It takes organization, time, relationship building and getting people on board to your cause and money,” Griffith said.

The Port of Anacortes Commission will discuss the tugboat during its meeting at 7 p.m. Thursday in the Commission Meeting Room in the Main Port Warehouse Building at First Street and Commercial Avenue.

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