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Getting nowhere at the bridge

Barge snafu, traffic snarls cause gridlock

By Chris Quay

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A towboat pushing 15 loaded coal barges struck the Sherman Minton Bridge around 5 a.m. yesterday, shutting down Interstate 64 for several hours.

No one on the boat or barges was injured, and no coal was spilled, said Lt. Kirk Beckmann, a Coast Guard spokesman.

The bridge reopened about 8 a.m. after it was inspected for structural integrity at the request of the Coast Guard, said Marvin Jenkins, a spokesman for the Indiana Department of Transportation's Seymour district.

The accident caused lengthy days for commuters from Southern Indiana after I-64 traffic was diverted to I-265 and then to I-65 south to enter Louisville. Traffic heading west on I-64 was diverted onto the Shawnee Expressway.

Michelle Hundley, who lives in Floyds Knobs and works at a dental office in St. Matthews, said she was stuck in traffic for about two hours.

"It was bumper-to-bumper," she said. Despite the traffic snarl, Southern Indiana police agencies reported only a few minor fender benders.

Jenkins said the bridge suffered only "superficial" damage and that no repairs would be needed.

The towboat also suffered minor damage, Beckmann said.

Initial reports said the vessel lost its ability to steer, but Beckmann said an official cause is under investigation.

The towboat, the Helen Lay, was heading upriver, Beckmann said. The craft works out of Paducah and is operated by Lay Leasing Inc.

American Electric Power, based in Chesterfield, Mo., chartered the boat through Lay, said spokesman Mark Carr.

The company sent operations officers from Paducah to the scene and Carr said it will cooperate fully with the Coast Guard's investigation.

After the incident, the towboat and barges were moved about a half-mile downriver, where the barges were picked up by another towboat.

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