



# UNITED STATES COAST GUARD

U.S. Department of Homeland Security

## FINDINGS OF CONCERN

### SECTOR New Orleans

January 7, 2026  
New Orleans, LA

Findings of Concern 001-26

## HAZARDS ASSOCIATED WITH TRANSITING BETWEEN ARTICULATED TUG AND BARGE COMBINATIONS

Purpose. The U.S. Coast Guard issues findings of concern to disseminate information related to unsafe conditions that were identified as causal factors in a casualty and could contribute to future incidents. Findings of concern are intended to educate the public, state, or local agencies about the conditions discovered so they may address the findings with an appropriate voluntary action or highlight existing applicable company policies or state/local regulations.

The Incident. While moored at a refinery in Chalmette, Louisiana, a towing vessel crew member fell approximately 30 feet into the tow notch of an ocean-going articulated tug and barge (ATB) after overextending their reach and losing their footing while climbing the barge's set-in pigeonholes. The fall resulted in multiple head and facial fractures, and the crew member became pinned within the tow notch, requiring mechanical movement of the tow pin system for water rescue. This accident was classified as a Serious Marine Incident, as the injured crew member received medical treatment beyond first aid and was deemed unfit for continued shipboard duties.



Figure 1: Barge pigeonhole embarkation station



Figure 2: View from the deck of the barge showing the pigeonhole vertical drop to the tow notch



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Contributing Factors and Analysis. The U.S. Coast Guard (USCG) investigation into the casualty revealed that the marine employer had safety management system (SMS) procedures requiring the use of fall-arrest equipment (i.e., safety harnesses with self-retracting connection lines) for tug-to-barge transits at heights of six feet or more. At the time of the incident, the towed barge was in ballast with a molded depth measurement of 47 feet, which presented the highest possible freeboard for crew pigeonhole climbing.

During USCG interviews, onboard supervisors expressed inconsistencies and displayed confusion as to when fall arrest safety harnesses were required by their SMS policy and agreed that additional training or policy clarifications may be necessary for adequate safety harness implementation during pigeonhole transits. Furthermore, the injured party, a junior crew member with only five days of total maritime experience, did not receive any training on pigeonhole climbing techniques or applicable personal protective gear. Additionally, an affixed gangway was available for use prior to and during the fall incident, but it was not utilized.

Findings of Concern. USCG investigators have identified the following recommended measures to mitigate the risks associated with the contributing factors identified above:

- Owners and operators of towing vessels whose crews regularly climb pigeonholes or set-in barge ladders at significant heights during transit to and from tows should ensure that appropriate fall prevention or fall arrest equipment is installed or readily available for use.
- Owners and operators of towing vessels who have already implemented procedures requiring fall arrest equipment use during tug to barge transits should ensure all crew members receive adequate training on how and when to use the equipment.
- If fall arrest equipment is not available, secure gangways should be used whenever possible to reduce the risks of the overwater transit including the possibility of falling overboard and becoming entrapped.
- As a reminder, the USCG previously issued guidance for safe passage between articulated tug and barge combinations, which can be found in [Navigation and Vessel Inspection Circular \(NVIC\) 02-81 Change 2](#).

Closing. These findings of concern are provided for informational purposes only and do not relieve any domestic or international safety, operational, or material requirements. For any questions or comments please contact Sector New Orleans Investigations Division by email at [SECNOIAIO@uscg.mil](mailto:SECNOIAIO@uscg.mil).