NTSB UPDATE ON *EL FARO* INVESTIGATION

In its continuing investigation of the sinking of the cargo ship *El Faro* in the Atlantic Ocean near the Bahamas, the National Transportation Safety Board (NTSB) announced from Washington on 20 October that it has developed the following factual information:

On 13 February 2015, *El Faro* successfully completed the American Bureau of Shipping (ABS) class and statutory surveys, meeting all rules and regulations as applicable. All deficiencies identified were rectified prior to completion of the surveys. None of the deficiencies were associated with *El Faro*’s main propulsion systems.

The annual inspection of *El Faro*, required by the United States Coast Guard (USCG), was completed by qualified USCG inspectors in San Juan, Puerto Rico, on 6 March 2015.

In June 2015, a qualified ABS surveyor examined and tested the main, auxiliary and emergency systems as part of the continuous machinery survey program and found them to be satisfactory.

TOTE, the ship’s owners, told investigators that *El Faro* was scheduled to be removed from the route between Jacksonville and San Juan and redeployed to the US West Coast where it would operate between Washington State and Alaska. In August, in order to prepare for this operational change, TOTE began to make modifications to the vessel while underway under the supervision of an additional chief engineer. Work on these modifications was performed by welders and machinists over many voyages, including during the accident voyage.

On 11 September 2015, TOTE received permission from the Coast Guard to shut down one of the ship’s two boilers so it could be inspected by an independent boiler service company during a voyage between San Juan and Jacksonville. As a result of the inspection, the boiler service company recommended service to both boilers during an upcoming drydock period that had already been scheduled for 6 November 2015. The boiler was returned to service following the inspection.

Interviews of relief crew and company management indicated that onboard safety drills were consistently conducted on a weekly basis. These included lifeboat drills for all crewmembers to ensure that all on board understood their responsibilities in an emergency.
Investigators interviewed two pilots that had guided *El Faro* in and out of the Port of Jacksonville; both reported that the vessel handled similarly to other vessels of its size and type.

The vessel’s terminal manager reported that *El Faro* met stability criteria when it left Jacksonville.

The company’s procedures called for some cargo on the ship to be double lashed regardless of the weather expected to be encountered during the voyage. The vessel stevedores reported that prior to *El Faro*’s departure on the accident voyage, the cargo was secured in accordance with those procedures.

Before *El Faro* departed Jacksonville, Tropical Storm Joaquin was predicted to become a hurricane and a marine hurricane warning was issued by the National Hurricane Center’s Advisory #8 at 1700EDT on 29 September.

At about 2015EDT on 29 September, *El Faro* departed Jacksonville, Florida for San Juan, Puerto Rico.

At 1332EDT on 30 September, the captain emailed a company safety official that he intended to take a route south of the predicted path of the hurricane and would pass about 65 miles from its centre.

In an advisory issued at 0200EDT on 1 October the National Hurricane Center predicted seas of 30 feet with sustained winds of 64 knots (74 mph), increasing to 105 knots (121 mph) as *El Faro* approached the wall of the eye of the hurricane.

In a recorded satellite phone call to the company’s emergency call centre at 0700EDT, the captain told the call centre operator that he had a marine emergency. He reported that there was a hull breach, a scuttle had blown open, and that there was water in hold number 3. He also said that the ship had lost its main propulsion unit and the engineers could not get it going. The operator then connected the captain with the Designated Person Ashore (DPA). The DPA told investigators that the captain had communicated similar information to him that was provided to the call centre operator, and also that the captain had estimated the height of the seas that *El Faro* was encountering to be 10 to 12 feet.

The USCG received electronic distress alerts from three separate sources on El Faro: the Ship’s Security Alert System (SSAS), the Inmarsat-C Alert, and the Emergency Position Indicating Radio Beacon (EPIRB).
According to electronic alert system data sent by the vessel at 0717 EDT on 1 October, its last reported position was about 20 miles from the edge of the eye of the hurricane.

The USCG did not have direct voice communications with *El Faro*, only electronic distress alerts.

NTSB investigators that travelled to Florida have returned to continue work on the investigation from NTSB headquarters in Washington. The NTSB contracted with the US Navy to locate the ship, document the wreckage on the sea floor and recover the voyage data recorder.

USNS *Apache*, a fleet ocean tug, was outfitted with specialized equipment for this mission, and departed Little Creek, Virginia, at about 1630 pm EDT on 19 October. In addition to the Navy crew, the NTSB Investigator-in-Charge, Tom Roth-Roffy, is on *Apache* with representatives from the USCG, TOTE and ABS, all parties to the NTSB investigation.

The Apache is estimated to arrive at the last known position of *El Faro* on 24 October to begin the search for the ship and to recover the voyage data recorder. Once the search operation begins, it is expected to take at least two weeks.

According to NTSB the length of the operation will depend on the circumstances encountered.