West Baton Rouge Parish sheriff’s deputies reroute westbound traffic from Interstate 10 in Port Allen after a barge struck a Whiskey Bay Bridge pier in Iberville Parish.

Barge hits bridge pier; I-10 closed briefly

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WHISKEY BAY — Authorities closed Interstate 10 from Lafayette to Port Allen for four hours Tuesday when a barge rammed into a pier of the bridge spanning the Whiskey Bay Pilot Channel, U.S. Coast Guard officials said.

Federal, state and parish agencies assembled near the site about 1 p.m. when initial reports indicated that three barges and the tugboat Chico contained highly flammable chemicals that were leaking.

Officials opened the interstate to traffic at 5:30 p.m. when they discovered that only a small amount of neohexane, a flammable substance, leaked from one of the barges, Coast Guard officials said.

The pilot and crew were not injured, officials said.

The same stretch of highway is expected to be closed to traffic between 11 a.m. and noon Wednesday while a private company attempts to remove the barges and tugboat, State Police spokesman Mike Sagers said. Westbound traffic likely will be rerouted from La. 415 to U.S. 190.

“It was a potentially dangerous situation,” Sagers said. “They feel the water is diluting and spreading it at this time so what is leaking is not a threat.”

About 270 barrels of neohexane leaked from two tanks in a barge, Campbell said. Officials had the leak under control by 9:30 p.m.

When reports of the incident surfaced, hundreds of law enforcement officials assembled at the accident site and interstate ramps with patrol cars and rescue boats. The State Police helicopter and Hazardous Materials Unit, Wildlife and Fisheries agents and Iberville sheriff’s flotilla rushed to the site.

State Department of Transportation and Development officials said the piers did not appear
to have suffered structural damage.

Several agencies planned to monitor the vessels Tuesday night while traffic continued on the interstate, Sagers said.

"They are looking at the best way to secure the vessels so they don't move," he said.

The tugboat was pushing three barges past the westernmost pier when one of the barges separated and struck a sand bar near the St. Martin Parish line, Sagers said. A second barge separated and struck a bridge pier, he said. The strong current apparently carried the tugboat and third barge to the eastern bank on the Iberville Parish side, he said.

Two tanks on a barge leaked the chemical, said Lt. Bruce Campbell of the U.S. Coast Guard office in New Orleans. The Coast Guard is in charge of the investigation, but released few details Tuesday night.

"We still don't know what caused it or the situation that led up to it," Campbell said. "The waterway is not closed. Apparently the barges are situated so that they can let marine traffic through one at a time."

A containment boom was expected to be placed around the leaking substance, Campbell said. A cleanup crew, hired by tugboat owner Chico Marine, was expected to formulate a plan Wednesday to remove the vessels and substance, he said.

Campbell did not know the names of the pilot and crew. He said the boat owners are believed to be based in Dayton, Texas.

DOTD spokesman Verdi Adams said the solid concrete piers were designed for collisions and apparently withstood the force.

"When we get in there tomorrow, we'll do further investigations," he said.