Workers free remnants of capsized boat from along banks of Passaic River

The long, tragic journey of the RV Riverwatch came to a loud and splintered end Saturday when the former U.S. Coast Guard rescue boat broke apart as workers dislodged it from a bank along the Passaic River, where it had been wedged since Hurricane Irene.

MICHAEL KARAS/STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER

Workers removing the wrecked RV Riverwatch from under the Rutgers Street Bridge in Belleville on Saturday.

But with its demise came some good: Another of the 1,400 vessels that have clogged the region's waterways in the wake of the recent megastorms has been removed.

Some 18 months after being capsized during the August 2011 hurricane, a river restoration crew with the Passaic Valley Sewerage Commission needed about two hours to drag what remained of the 31-foot-long craft from under the Rutgers Street Bridge in Belleville.

But as the metal teeth of a Caterpillar machine flipped over the 15,000-pound boat, part of the hull broke and the contents – including a life preserver ring that split in two – spilled back into the water and floated into a boom that had been set up to catch any debris.

"We knew it was going to be a little bit tough," said Scott Scardilli, a commission employee who operated the excavator hoe on a relatively small triangle of land beside a

steep and muddy embankment. "I think things went pretty well," he added as a worker crew prepared to hoist what remained of the boat onto a flatbed trailer.

From there the wreck was taken to a commission garage in Newark where it would be dismantled and scrapped, said spokeswoman Hollie A. Gilroy.

The work – which has been postponed twice before by snowstorms – was done while the state Department of Transportation shut down a northbound exit from Route 21 for several hours.

Gilroy said the RV Riverwatch was a 1968 Coast Guard vessel that had been used in search-and-rescue missions. More recently, it had been used as part of an environmental survey by Montclair State University, she said.

It was the second boat that crews had pulled from the Passaic River this month in the ongoing effort to keep the waterway free of pollution and obstructions, said Mike DeFrancisco, executive director of the commission, which is responsible for removing any obstructions from the Passaic.

Brian Davenport, a project manager with the commission, said the RV Riverwatch was one of the largest objects that crews had pulled from the river.

Normally, the commission has a skimmer boat that removes objects from the water for about eight months out of the year, Davenport said.

"We get anything from shopping carts, tires, construction debris — a lot of illegally dumped material." Davenport said. "You name it. It's out here on the Passaic River from boats to bodies, we find it all."

Davenport said the previous owner of the Riverwatch, Paul Lerin, had relinquished ownership of the boat to the commission.
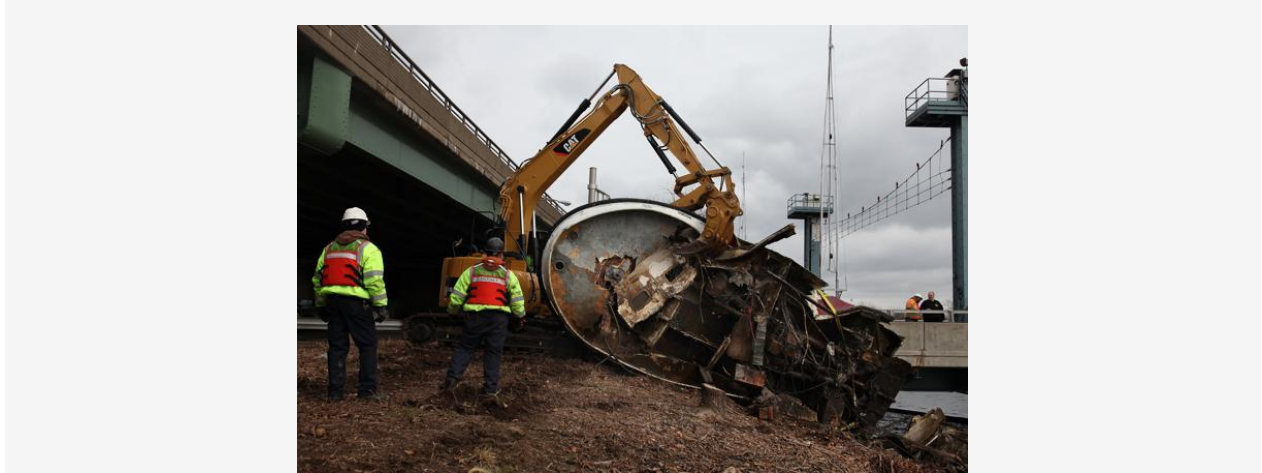
Lerin could not be reached for comment, but was interviewed in a video posted on YouTube by Wheeler Antabanez, the pen name of a Montclair writer. In the video, Lerin described how the boat came loose from its moorings during Irene.

"It looked like a battleship going down," Lerin said of news footage that showed the boat sinking beneath the bridge. "That's all she wrote. ... Just another wreck in the Passaic River."

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Photos: Vessel removed from under Rutgers Street Bridge

MICHAEL KARAS/STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER

The Passaic Valley Sewerage Commission removes a capsized vessel that has been abandoned under the Rutgers Street Bridge in Belleville. The RV Riverwatch was wedged between the bank of the Passaic River and the Rutgers Street Bridge in Belleville. The RV Riverwatch is a 1968, 31 foot former U.S. Coast Guard vessel. It most recently was used as a research vessel for Montclair State University. It was abandoned under the Rutgers Street Bridge in Belleville just prior to Hurricane Irene.