

M/V COSCO BUSCAN Pilot Pleads Guilty



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The U.S. Department of Justice announced on March 6, 2009 that John Joseph Cota, a California ship pilot, pleaded guilty to criminal charges of violating the Oil Pollution Act of 1990 and the Migratory Bird Treaty Act. Cota served as the California state pilot for the M/V COSCO BUSCAN when the vessel collided with the San Francisco Bay Bridge on November 7, 2007, spilling approximately 53,000 gallons of oil into the San Francisco Bay. The oil spill killed at least 2,000 migratory birds, including brown pelicans, marbled murrelets, and western gulls.

Cota confessed that his failures to discuss the vessel's intended route with the ship's master and crew and to use the ship's radar properly upon approaching the bridge contributed to the collision and resulting environmental damage. He also admitted to failing to disclose several medications that he was taking on forms required by the Coast Guard in 2006 and 2007, including Vicodin and Zoloft.

Sentencing is scheduled for June 19, 2009, and Cota will face a possible sentence of two to 10 months in prison and a fine of \$3,000 to \$30,000. He will also be required to serve a one-year supervised release and be unable to pilot a ship during that time. The ship's manager, Fleet Management Ltd. of Hong Kong, faces similar charges, and additional charges for allegedly obstructing justice and making false statements. Trial for Fleet Management is set for September 14, 2009.

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