



Two aircraft have flown over an oil drilling ship that ran aground in a severe Alaskan storm and saw no sign that the vessel was leaking fuel or that its hull had been breached.

The Royal Dutch Shell ship, the Kulluk, which was used in the Arctic last summer, ran aground on Monday on a sand and gravel shore off an uninhabited island near Kodiak Island in the Gulf of Alaska. The ship appeared stable, according to US federal on-scene response co-ordinator Captain Paul Mehler.

"There is no sign of a release of any product," Mehler said during a news conference at an Anchorage hotel.

When the storm eases and weather permits, marine experts intend to board the Kulluk to take photos and videos, and then devise a salvage plan.

Mehler said the Kulluk was carrying about 143,000 gallons (541,000 litres) of diesel, as well as about 12,000 gallons of lubricating oil and hydraulic fluid.

A coastguard C-130 plane and helicopter were used to fly over the grounded vessel on Tuesday morning. The severe weather did not allow marine experts to board the ship, which is being pounded by stormy seas.

Mehler said there was a team of about 500 people working on a response to the situation, "with

many more coming".

The goal remained to get salvagers aboard the Kulluk and the ship refloated, Mehler added.

A Shell official said the ship was built with a double-sided hull of reinforced steel that is 7.5cm (3in) thick. It had recently undergone \$292m (£178.8m) worth of improvements before being put into service for a short time last summer in the Beaufort Sea, off Alaska's north coast.

Stormy weather eased on Tuesday with waves 7.5-9 metres (25-30ft) and winds reduced to about 35mph. Winds were 70mph and waves had reached 15 metres overnight, the US National Weather Service said.

The Kulluk was towed on Monday by a 360ft anchor handler, the Aiviq, and a tugboat, the Alert. The vessels moved north along Kodiak Island, to escape the worst of the storm. At about 4.15pm the drill ship separated from the Aiviq about 10-15 miles offshore. The tugboat crew guided the drill ship to a place where it would cause the least environmental damage and cut it loose.

Sean Churchfield, operations manager for Shell Alaska, said once the situation was under control an investigation would be conducted into the cause. The coastguard said it would also be investigating and its findings would be made public.

Congressman Ed Markey, the top Democrat on the House Natural Resources Committee, issued a statement on Tuesday expressing his concerns about the situation. "Oil companies keep saying they can conquer the Arctic, but the Arctic keeps disagreeing with the oil companies," Markey said. "Drilling expansion could prove disastrous for this sensitive environment."