

As Bridge Cleanup Gets Underway, Officials Warn of ‘Daunting’ Process

Clearing the debris from the collapsed Francis Scott Key Bridge will be a complex but urgent task, officials said. And rebuilding it may take several years, they cautioned.

By Michael Corkery
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With search and rescue efforts over, officials have fully turned to the cleanup and rebuilding phase in the aftermath of the collapse of the Francis Scott Key Bridge in Baltimore. Clearing the debris, which is blocking a vital shipping lane into the Port of Baltimore, is likely to be completed in a matter of weeks, engineering and salvage experts say. But reconstructing the bridge will be a long process, federal and state officials cautioned.

The bridge collapse on Tuesday, caused by a 985-foot-long ship that struck a critical component of the structure, has rocked Baltimore and the shipping industry at large. Six men, all construction workers who were working on filling potholes on the bridge, were missing after the collapse, and the bodies of two of them were found on Wednesday. Officials have called off the search for the other missing men, who are presumed dead, saying divers can no longer reach the area where they believe more victims remain, and moved to a cleanup operation.

“This is daunting. This is complicated,” Gov. Wes Moore of Maryland said of the process on Thursday, declining to give a timeline. But, he added, “People should rest assured we are going to get this done.”

Cleaning up the debris from the shipping channel is indeed expected to be a complex and potentially dangerous underwater salvage operation, and the stakes for Baltimore and the regional economy are high.

Reopening the Port of Baltimore, a vital hub for automobiles on the East Coast and one of the busiest shipping ports in the nation, is imperative for state and federal leaders. Since the collapse, vessel traffic has been shut down, and about a dozen ships are stuck in the port, which employs 8,000 people.

On Thursday, officials said U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, which maintains the shipping channel in Baltimore to ensure that it is navigable, would fully cover the costs of clearing the channel. As for rebuilding the bridge, the Biden administration announced that it was allocating \$60 million in emergency federal highway funds to that operation. The U.S. Transportation Department called the money a “down payment toward initial costs” and said it would make additional emergency highway funds available.

