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### Suda's 'Jacob' capitalizes on liftboat shortage in Gulf

by Matthew Penix



Ajay Suda, president of A.K. Suda Inc., said the unique design helped make his Jacob liftboat an attractive option for the Gulf of Mexico. (Photo by Matthew Penix)

The post-Katrina demand for liftboats in the Gulf of Mexico just shrunk 20 percent.

The "Jacob," a \$17.8-million boat designed by Metairie-based A.K. Suda Inc. for CS Liftboats in Abbeville, launched in the Gulf of Mexico July 14. The move helps alleviate a five- to six-boat demand for post-Katrina cleanup, according to Houston-based energy consultants Petrie Parkman & Co.

CS Liftboats President Chester Smith intends to capitalize on the need. He ordered Jacob nearly three years ago using an ambitious design that required the longest usable leg length of any vessel of its kind at 265 feet long.

"The need is there and that makes me moolah," said Smith.

"This isn't a business for the light-hearted."

As a buyer, seller and renter of offshore marine vessels for more than 45 years, Smith wasted no time putting Jacob to work. With offshore rigs in need of repairs, he said he can earn \$1 million a month and has already turned down offers to sell Jacob for \$8 million more than he paid for it.

Liftboats, considered the transport trucks of the offshore oil industry, are supply vessels with retractable legs that are lowered to the ocean floor. Once anchored to the sea floor, the boat hydraulically raises out of the water next to a rig where cranes can deliver supplies and make repairs.

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Petrie Parkman & Co. predicted a backlog of months for liftboats after Hurricane Katrina. Insurers paid out more than \$8 billion in claims for storm damage in the Gulf of Mexico, and demand is rampant for liftboats to handle cleanup and repairs, said Russell Ciravola, Suda chief engineer.

Most liftboats use only a portion of possible leg length because a crane is attached to the legs. Smith wanted a more maneuverable boat so President Ajay Suda's team placed the 200-ton crane on the liftboat's deck. Engineers shaved roughly 15 feet off the boat's three galvanized steel legs and cut costs by an estimated \$12 million.

The liftboat design is unique to the Metairie company, said Suda, who's designed 50 such

boats since his company incorporated in 1983.

"We went around the leg but didn't touch the leg," he said. "Once you see it, it looks so obvious."

Asked why other naval architects aren't following suit, Suda shrugged his shoulders. "I don't know."

Suda said he is relieved Jacob was launched after two years of design and nine months of construction. It almost missed its first maiden voyage when Hurricane Katrina threatened Rodriguez Boat Builders near Bayou La Batre, Ala., where the 1,500-ton boat was being built.

Anticipating a flood, boat builders cut holes into the hull to allow for rising water.

"This opened 60 percent of the hull to the atmosphere," giving it more buoyancy, said Joey Rodriguez, yard director.

The 12-foot deep hull flooded with 5 feet of water on the liftboat but the vital parts stayed dry and didn't float away.

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