

Senator Mark Begich remarks
Exxon Valdez Oil Spill 20th Anniversary Event
March 13, 2009, Russell #253

Thank you for the opportunity speak on this important occasion. For many Alaskans, the Exxon Valdez oil spill was one of those momentous national events that you remember forever. At the time I was a legislative aide in our state Capitol and neither I – nor I suspect most Alaskans – appreciated the magnitude of that incident.

Eleven million gallons – enough oil to stretch from Cape Cod to North Carolina’s Outer Banks – gushed into one of Alaska’s most spectacular and sensitive areas. For months, night after night on the national news, America and the world were gripped by images of pristine shorelines, birds and animals awash in oil. Alaska’s age of innocence – our belief that it could never happen to us – ended when the marine radio crackled with the words of Capt. Joe Hazelwood that he had fetched-up hard-aground on Bligh Reef and apparently was leaking some oil.

Now, 20 years later, scars to Alaska’s environment and Alaska’s people remain. Thousands of Alaskans – and sadly fewer and fewer each year – are just now being compensated for damage. Livelihoods and ways of life are forever different.

As we assess the lessons learned a decade later, one truth rises above all others: We must be committed to paying the price of vigilance, because the price of complacency is too high.

Prince William Sound still feels the impacts of the spill. While some species have recovered, the herring fishery closed in the wake of the Exxon Valdez and remains so to this day. Subsistence users say their traditional way of life has not returned to normal.

Yet, thanks to some good work by the Prince William Sound RCAC, NOAA and the USCG, much good has been done to dramatically advance our knowledge of the marine environment and permanently protect many ecosystems in the region affected. We’ve strengthened monitoring and response with tractor tug escorts and ocean rescue capabilities.

After two decades of reflection, I think most Alaskans believe strongly in protecting our environment, and believe we can do so as we responsibly develop the rich natural resources with which our state was endowed.

President Teddy Roosevelt put it well nearly 90 years ago when he said: “The nation behaves well if it treats the natural resources as assets which it must turn over to the next generation increased, and not impaired, in value.”

That is my goal for Alaska. And that’s a goal Alaskans came to appreciate even more after the tragic events in Price William Sound 20 years ago this month.