

Letter From the President

During the past year, much attention was focused on the twentieth anniversary of the Exxon Valdez oil spill. The causes and effects of the calamity were reviewed, and the progress made in spill prevention and response was discussed and recognized.

Rather than revisit that history, I wish to offer some observations on the challenges and opportunities our organization will face in coming years.

Our council's mission is accomplished through relationships and communication with our constituents, the oil industry, and the regulatory and legislative communities, all of whom have a common interest in the environmentally sound operation of the Alyeska terminal in Valdez and the oil tankers that use it. It is within this context that I see not only our greatest challenge, but also a great opportunity.

In the realm of constituent relations, the need of our council to maintain relevance in the minds of our constituents is fundamental to our continued success, if not to our very existence. Keeping the organization visible and engaged in our communities has become more difficult as the memory of the spill has faded. It would be a shame were the organization to become no more than a social club for spill survivors.

The board, recognizing this challenge, has established an Information and Education Committee. Working with the staff, this new committee can use state-of-the-art Internet-based communications tools to tap into the "connected" culture and budding environmental consciousness of younger generations.

At the same time, we must remain a conduit for two-way communication between our member groups and the regulatory and industry communities.

The problem of deteriorating communication is beginning to strain our relations with the regulatory community.

Through the natural process of staff turnover within state and federal agencies and a redefinition of the priorities of the Coast Guard, we are finding that senior regulatory staff has less knowledge of our mandate, our past achievements, and our expectations for joint effort and cooperation. The challenge is to conduct our activities in a manner that benefits the common mission of environmental protection so that the regulators come to once again recognize us as an ally.

Conversely, on the legislative front we have had a resurgence of communication and success in pursuit of a legislative remedy to the problem of sunseting tanker escort requirements. At the state level, this yielded a unanimous legislative resolution, signed by the governor, endorsing the continuation of the present system of dual escorts. This success has proved extremely valuable in our efforts to seek federal legislation. Senators Lisa Murkowski and Mark Begich and Representative Don Young have joined in promoting draft federal legislation to preserve the escort system. We continue to push for passage of this bill and to maintain open and direct communication with our legislative community.

It is understandable that our greatest communications challenge lies in our dialogue with the oil industry. While we share a joint goal of environmentally sound operation of the terminal and tankers, we have differing views of the actions required and the expenditures necessary to achieve that end. Historically, this conflict



Steve Lewis,
President

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has been based largely on the difference between industry experiences in the rest of the world, including the risk tolerance of the high-seas shipping industry, juxtaposed with the extremely local and conservation-based interests of citizens of the region affected by the Exxon Valdez spill.

In this third decade of the Valdez crude oil trade, however, a new element has entered the equation: North Slope oil production has passed from being a growing development through midlife and into decline. This decline is expected to continue and the industry leaders who now operate the system are developing plans for an “end game” strategy that will allow them to withdraw from Alaska in a controlled manner.

A major element in this strategy will be cost control, and expenditures for spill prevention and response will come under increasing pressure. Our challenge is to counter any cost-reduction efforts that would result in increased risk. At the same time we must continue to promote improvements such as “green ship” technology, increased response capability in adverse weather, invasive species interdiction, and overall citizen advocacy.

While reading the council’s recently published book, *The Spill: Personal Stories from the Exxon Valdez Disaster*, I was struck by the fact that, in nearly every chapter, the person speaking, regardless of affiliation or involvement, mentioned the role that communication, or the lack thereof, played in the events leading up to the spill and in every aspect of the response. As we look forward to the challenges of the next decade we must remember this lesson and not lose sight of the fact that effective communication is the most important tool in the spill prevention and response arsenal.

If we plan and conduct the business of our committees, staff and board with a focus on effective communication, we will greatly increase the probability that, when the last tanker departs from the Valdez terminal, there will have been no recurrence of the Exxon Valdez spill. If, on that final day, Prince William Sound remains the pristine and uniquely productive place it was before it became an industry transportation corridor, only then will we be able to say that our job is done, and that it was done well.

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Note: This report covers the period from July 2008 through June 2009.