

Guest Opinion Submission

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Tug grounding raises troubling questions, reinforces lessons of Exxon Valdez spill

The Coast Guard is still investigating the Dec. 23 grounding of the *Pathfinder* ice scout tug in Prince William Sound, and few facts about the causes are known.

But the troubling questions this accident raises about oil-industry operations in the Sound are already in evidence, and worthy of public consideration.

The first question is, how did the crew manage to hit Bligh Reef, the most famous navigational hazard in the Sound, 20 years after the *Exxon Valdez* hit it and spilled 11 million gallons of North Slope crude? What happened, or didn't happen, aboard the *Pathfinder* to cause this accident?

And why did the Coast Guard's Vessel Traffic Center in Valdez, with its radar systems and other equipment, did not spot the danger and warn the tug's crew? If that is not currently part of the traffic center's mission, should the mission be expanded so as to prevent such accidents in the future?

And what environmental harm will be caused by the diesel fuel that spilled into the water? While diesel is generally considered less harmful to the environment than crude oil, that doesn't mean it's harmless. This is the second significant diesel spill resulting from the oil industry operations in the Sound in recent years, so it's clear that diesel spills are a significant hazard. Their impacts on the marine ecosystem need to be understood so that effective countermeasures can be adopted.

Even as these questions are under study, they reinforce important lessons from the *Exxon Valdez* spill 20 years ago.

For one, constant vigilance is the price of safety. There is never a moment when we can assume the system in Prince William Sound is safe because there hasn't been a catastrophe lately.

For another, backup systems are indispensable, and they need to be in place and operating. One of those, as mentioned above, is the Coast Guard radar center. Another is the iceberg detection radar system that was installed several years ago on Reef Island after much expenditure and effort by our council, Alyeska Pipeline Service Co., and the Coast Guard.

This system scans the tanker lanes for icebergs and transmits the information back to Valdez for use in making go/no-go sailing decisions for oil tankers—the same function performed by ice scouts like the *Pathfinder*. However, the Reef Island radar can detect icebergs in weather too dark or foggy for direct observation by vessel crews and thus can be a valuable adjunct to ice scout vessels or even make a scouting trip unnecessary if the radar detects very heavy accumulations of icebergs in the tanker lanes, though that was not the case in the *Pathfinder* grounding.

Unfortunately, this system has been inoperative since late summer, after a Coast Guard upgrade to its own system on Reef Island took the iceberg detection radar system offline. The council believes it is of paramount importance to restore this system to service and has been working with Alyeska and the Coast Guard to that end.

Our council was set up to make sure the complacency that allowed the *Exxon Valdez* disaster never returns. That is the main reason we have been working so hard to preserve another crucial backup system in Prince William Sound: the system of double escort tugs for loaded oil tankers in the Sound. Our group is now lobbying Congress for federal legislation to preserve the double escorts so that, if another tanker should someday go astray and head for Bligh Reef, backup will be close at hand to prevent another catastrophe like the one in 1989.

Whatever the final cause of the *Pathfinder* grounding, this incident should serve as a forceful reminder to the oil industry and its regulators that complacency never sleeps, so we humans can never let down our guard in Prince William Sound.

Steve Lewis is president of the board of the Prince William Sound Regional Citizens' Advisory Council, where he represents the city of Seldovia. The council is an independent non-profit corporation whose mission is to promote environmentally safe operation of the Valdez Marine Terminal and the oil tankers that use it. The council's work is guided by the Oil Pollution Act of 1990, and its contract with Alyeska Pipeline Service Company. The council's 18 member organizations are communities in the region affected by the 1989 Exxon Valdez oil spill, as well as aquaculture, commercial fishing, environmental, Native, recreation, and tourism groups. More information about the council is available at www.pwsrca.org on the Internet.

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