

Op-Ed Submission
Contact: Stan Jones

May 18, 2010
907-273-6230 / jones@pwsrccac.org

In the Gulf of Mexico, history repeats itself

By Mark Swanson

Alaskans who were here for the Exxon Valdez oil spill of 1989 are surely dismayed by recent events in the Gulf of Mexico.

There, as in Prince William Sound, the oil industry and its government regulators promised Americans the chance of disaster was negligible. They promised that, if there was a spill, they could clean it up with a minimum of harm.

Once again, they were wrong on both counts.

Once again, a beautiful body of water has been fouled by a catastrophic oil spill, damaging the natural and human environments.

Once again, government and industry have shown themselves incapable of fast, effective response. A month has passed since BP's Deepwater Horizon drilling rig blew up and killed 11 workers. Despite the valiant efforts of tens of thousands of responders, the leak has not been stopped, nor have the millions of gallons of oil spewed out been effectively cleaned up. Some has been skimmed off or burned, but, clearly, the majority of it is still in the water, in either raw or dispersed form.

While Alaskans should be dismayed by this sorry spectacle, they shouldn't be surprised. We've come to expect the worst when it comes to effective regulation of big business by government. That certainly seems to have been the case in the Gulf, where the oil industry and its regulators appear to have learned almost nothing about the need for prevention and preparedness from the disaster in Prince William Sound 21 years ago.

In the Sound itself, though, the picture is different. There, the lessons of the Exxon Valdez are still in active effect today.

In the Sound, prevention is still a high priority. Single-hull oil tankers like the Exxon Valdez no longer operate there. Every loaded oil tanker is escorted by two powerful rescue tugs in case of emergency. In addition, a radar system near Bligh Reef detects icebergs like those that played a role in the Exxon Valdez grounding.

Response also remains a high priority. The oil industry must be ready to clean up 300,000 barrels of oil within 72 hours. A major part of the system for doing so is Alaska's commercial fishermen. Alyeska Pipeline, in charge of the first 72 hours of response to tanker spills in the Sound, keeps over 300 fishing vessels under contract for oil-spill response; some are required to be ready to respond within six hours of notification.

Why are the lessons of the Exxon Valdez still actively debated and enforced in Prince William Sound?

When Congress passed the Oil Pollution Act of 1990, it identified complacency as a cause of the Exxon spill. "One way to combat this complacency," Congress declared,

“is to involve local citizens in the process of preparing, adopting, and revising oil spill contingency plans.”

As in Alaska, the oil industry in the Gulf of Mexico comprises a large segment of the region’s economy, employment, and tax base. That dependency creates some reluctance to compel costly safeguards or business-impeding environmental controls.

Citizen oversight operates on a basic moral imperative: Those with the most to lose from pollution must have a voice in decisions that put their livelihoods and communities at risk. In Prince William Sound, the citizen voice has been crucial in numerous safety improvements since the Exxon spill, from double-hull requirements to the adoption of high-performance escort tugs to the development of iceberg detection technology, and even elimination of the release of toxic benzene vapors when tankers load oil.

The legislation sure to grow out of the Gulf spill will likely address the need for better regulation of offshore oil development and perhaps raise liability limits on oil spillers.

We think Congress should also consider making citizen oversight a key part of the system to ensure nothing like BP’s Gulf spill happens again.

Citizen oversight isn’t good just for the environment—it’s also good for the affected industry, because it helps the industry get things right the first time.

And that’s absolutely crucial in preventing catastrophes like the Exxon and BP oil spills.

Mark Swanson is executive director of the Prince William Sound Regional Citizens' Advisory Council. The council, with offices in Anchorage and Valdez, 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 19 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. For a high-quality digital photograph of Mark Swanson, contact Stan Jones at the email address above. For more information on the council, visit www.pwsrca.org on the Internet.◇