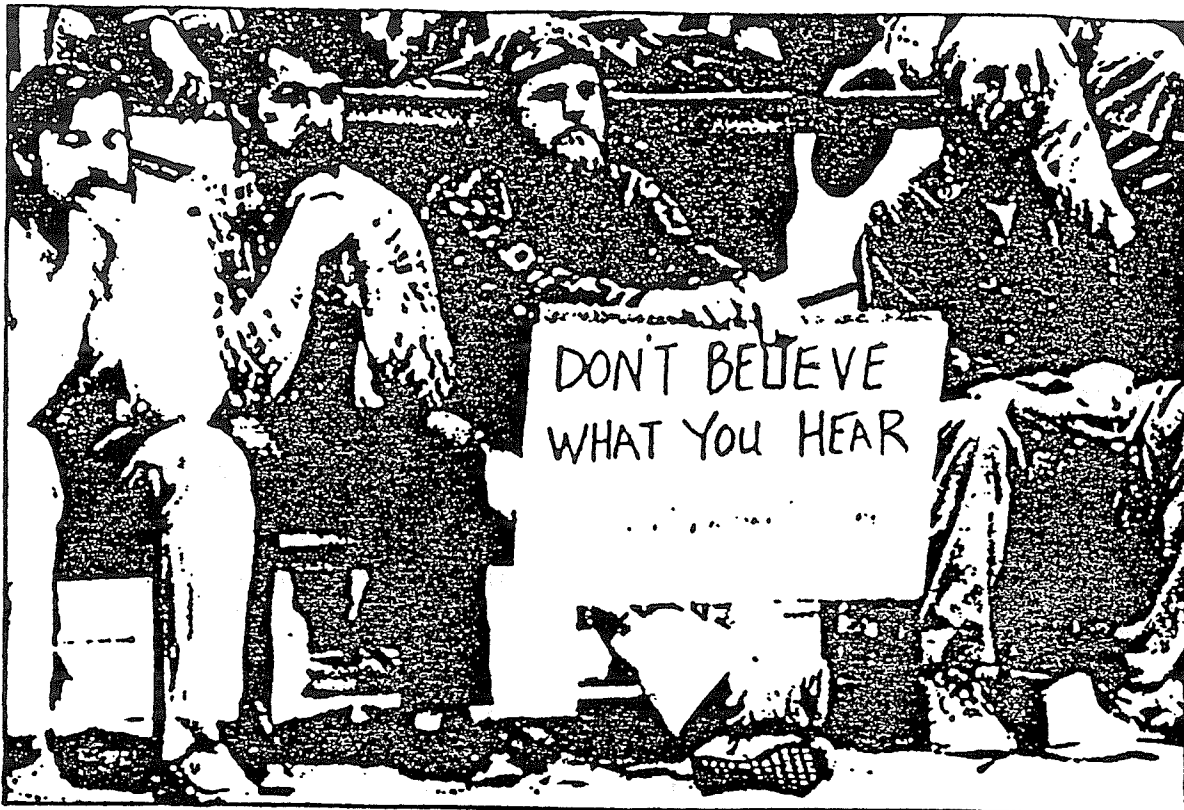


Cordova fishermen tear lifestyle threat



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Cordova fishermen listen to Exxon officials talk about the oil spill during a three hour meeting held Tuesday evening.

Cordova: Fishermen may be worst hit

Continued from page A-1

Sound gillnetter. "There could be no more Cordova, Alaska, after the violence of this spill. The salmon might come back, but we don't know if we can sell them."

Twelve people sat at a black-shrouded table on the gym stage. They included Alyeska Pipeline Service Company President George M. Nelson, Exxon spokesman Don Cornett, U.S. Coast Guard Commander Steve McCall, Fish and Game Commissioner Don Collingsworth and other state and federal fisheries management officials. There was an angry, frustrated, even desperate air in the audience, as the town's fishermen and their families got a chance to vent their anger at human symbols of the oil. But despite a few angry outbursts and many bitter comments, the meeting remained relatively calm.

After Nelson, Cornett and McCall arrived late for the start of the 7 p.m. meeting, they drew an angry response when they said they would have to leave early. They changed plans and remained until the meeting ended about 11 p.m.

Cornett and McCall were attacked for their organizations' roles in the tanker grounding and the subsequent spill of some 6,000 barrels of oil.

Cornett apologized for the accident and promised Exxon would pay off reasonable claims to those whom the spill will hurt. "If you can show you had a loss as the result of a spill, we will compensate you," he said. "You have my word."

But fishermen were skeptical of any rapid settlement of their claims, and many doubted any monetary value could be placed on their loss. "How much is your

lifestyle worth to you?" challenged one speaker.

Each of the officials spoke briefly on how their agencies were reacting to the spill.

Ken Florey, a research manager for the sound, announced the halt of shrimp harvesting in pots and that the scheduled April 3 black cod opening was canceled pending studies of the effect of the oil on the fish.

The oil is known to be highly toxic to salmon fry soon to be emerging from their eggs, Florey said. It also endangers the millions of recently hatched fry held in the four major salmon hatcheries that supply a majority of the sound's pink salmon harvest.

The state also will watch to see whether oil taints the impending herring roe fisheries, both wild and cultivated, and other species including crab, halibut, shrimp and bottomfish, he said. The state doesn't yet know whether the salmon season, projected to bring a harvest of some 27 million pink salmon alone, will take place this summer, Florey said.

James Brady, Cordova-area biologist for Alaska Fish and Game, said the rescue efforts need to focus on erecting oil-restraining booms across the harbor mouths at the four major hatcheries.

"We need to deploy our defenses in the most critical areas," Brady said. "We have a tremendous resource and we'll do everything in the world to protect its reputation in the marketplace."

After listening politely to the fisheries managers, questioners zeroed in on representatives of the Coast Guard, Exxon and Alyeska Pipeline Service Co. Fishermen blasted them for inadequate contingency plans, insufficient quantities of clean-up

materials, delays in deciding whether to use chemical dispersants, and their refusal to accept volunteer cleanup help offered by fishermen.

Marla Adkins, a Prince William Sound lodge owner, read a statement criticizing the state and oil industry for "complacency."

"I realize that no one is ever prepared for a spill of this magnitude," she said, "but I find the response time, cleanup actions, and lack of immediate contingency plans totally unsatisfactory."

The officials defended the record of tankers out of Valdez and said they were doing the best they could.

"We didn't know what to do with our help," Cornett said, noting that previous use of volunteer help in other spills had led to legal problems for the company.

McCall was jeered by fishermen when he said his radar lost track of the tanker 20 miles out of Valdez. One fisherman said his 28-foot seiner's radar had better reach.

While some vented anger, others expressed cynical resignation in the face of the oil spill.

"The almighty dollar rules the world, and the Alaskans who agreed to the pipeline had the wool pulled over their eyes," said Bob Preis, 52, skipper of a local salmon seiner. "I've heard people say we were overreacting, but I'm damned afraid there's been a real tragedy, and we may not find out all about it for years."

"I've got two sons under 2 years old," said John Mehlich, a seiner from Cordova. "I've got to feed them. My biggest concern is my whole way of life. This year I'm going to have to go out and clean up oil, and I'd rather be fishing."