

Homer residents begin building booms

By JOE HUNT
Times Writer

HOMER — Tired of waiting for boom that may never show, Homer residents brought out their chainsaws, cant hooks and hammers Thursday and began manufacturing the material needed to save Cook Inlet shores.

The long, black fingers of the Exxon Valdez tragedy have reached this fishing

community and tourism hub on Kachemak Bay by spreading fear ahead of the slick itself. But the slick is not far behind.

When the Exxon Valdez ran aground three weeks ago, the only consolation felt by residents here was that their own pristine inlet was spared by the nation's worst oil spill. Today, a trail of brown, oil-based mousse and thin sheets of iridescent sheen are hovering at the entrance to Cook

Inlet.

The residents of Homer have no intention of letting it in.

Concern about the local fisheries, a plan to save beaches filled with clams and mussels and an appreciation for the intricate marine world in their own backyard has kept residents scurrying for more than two weeks.

The local fishermen knew within a few

days of the tanker accident that the mass of oil was out of control and heading their way, according to Marge Tillian, an organizer of the local defense efforts.

Fishermen know the flow of currents better than anybody, she said. "Hey, we fish there and we know how long it takes to have fish gear float this way," Tillian said. "If you're fishing, you know how the

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tides move and how the currents move."

Overflights Thursday showed the leading edge of oil mousse and sheen has reached within three miles of Cape Douglas at the easternmost edge of Katmai National Park. That oil will likely head toward Shellkof Strait, according to Leonard Wehking, a Bureau of Land Management specialist tracking the spill.

"The main body of oil appears to be moving past and at this time it doesn't appear to have any movement toward the inlet," Wehking said. "I'm not saying there's nothing coming up here, but there's nothing major coming up here." Tillian's fishing instincts tell her the oil will reach the beaches along Cook Inlet within a few days, not in large patches, she said, but one small blotch at a time.

Others agree. "With the winds, it's inevitable that it'll be here," said Ed Schofield, organizer of a boom manufacturing effort. "I only wish we could have started sooner."

The tip of the Homer Spit is literally buzzing with the sound of chainsaws as a crew of 30 builds deflection boom out of logs, plywood and a thick synthetic mate-

The work is the culmination of five days of planning and experimentation. Exxon's cleanup contractor Veco shipped in the necessary materials and put the crew on the payroll to begin rolling out the makeshift boom Wednesday afternoon.

A sense of urgency kept the construction at a fevered pace. Schofield hoped to put out 600 to 1,000 feet of the crude-looking boom a day. The crew, earning \$16.00 an hour through Veco, worked continuously to meet that order.

The money, most say, has little to do with the hard work. Many of them were at the job planning and organizing the operation long before Veco made it possible by providing materials.

"We live here. The bay is here. I'd do it for nothing," said Willie Tymrak, a fisherman and logger. "It's not dollars at all."

"We were tired of sitting around doing nothing," added Randy Holt, a local carpenter. "Now it's time to go to work."

"It took a little while to get organized, but it's moving along now," said Peter Gagne, a logger. "I'll tell ya, it's a great bunch of guys."

"We've been chomping at the bit here for five days and they've finally turned us loose here," said Bob Archibald. "This is what we built since this morning."

Archibald pointed toward 500 feet of log

boom stacked and ready to deploy in the bay. The boom is made from two logs joined side-by-side for stability. A plywood splash guard juts up from the center about two feet and the weighted Typar material hangs below, 3 feet into the water.

The booms were to be taken to the battle front, to the bays and coves just miles from the oil slick. More log boom is being made across the bay in Seldovia, Port Graham, and Eldridge Passage.

A Soldotna fisherman, Frank Mullen, has contracted with Exxon to make several thousand feet of high-quality boom. He, too, has been producing about 1,000 feet of boom a day. Considering the miles of delicate shoreline and productive fishing spots, the boom can only protect the most vital areas. The Homer residents know that the boom is only a Band-Aid for a potential disaster, but most agree that it's better than doing nothing.

Tillian believes the boom building is good therapy for the town. "They (Exxon) should let people build boom for a couple of weeks and work out their frustrations," she said.

"I'm no psychologist," Tillian said, "but it doesn't take much to realize what people need in a disaster. They need to work out their energy and frustrations."

... of the organization in Homer has

been spearheaded by the BLM's Incident Command Team. They're a group that's made a profession of emergency response and organization, usually associated with forest fires.

The government command team is phasing out its involvement today and relinquishing control to Exxon. Wiley Bragg, Exxon's liaison in Homer, praised the resident volunteers and the BLM crew for piecing together a working organization.

Bragg said that he planned on keeping the local residents working, though he wasn't clear how many would actually be paid for their efforts. The payroll will undoubtedly grow, however.

"In getting things done the quickest way possible, we're going to use local people to fill in the key slots, bringing with them their knowledge of the area and the knowledge of what needs to be done," Bragg said.

He, too, saw the futility of trying to cover all the vital shoreline that needs protection. "We take the position that some barrier is better than no barrier," Bragg said. "If we didn't do that, in my opinion, it would be unconscionable. We've got to do whatever we can to get boom in place."