

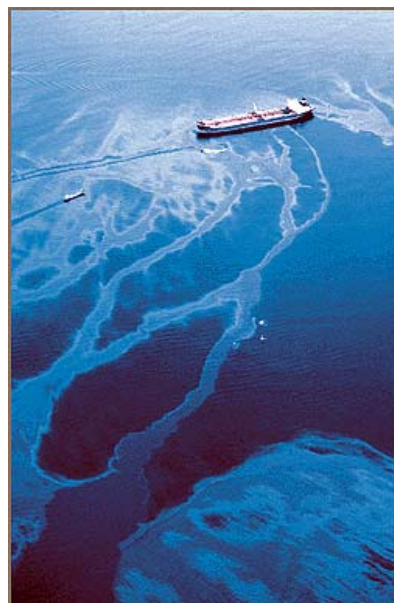
## **TAB 1**

### **Overview: The Exxon Valdez Oil Spill and Response**

- The Problem and the Solution

## Overview: The Problem and the Solution

President George H.W. Bush described the *Exxon Valdez* oil spill as “the worst marine environmental disaster this nation has ever experienced.” On March 24, 1989, the fully loaded oil tanker *Exxon Valdez* hit an underwater reef, rupturing the ship’s hull and spilling some 11 million gallons of crude oil into the pristine waters of Prince William Sound, Alaska. The oil spill was caused by major, tragic human errors. The event also highlighted a broader problem in the U.S. oil transportation industry and with the public – complacency.



The Prince William Sound dual escort system for oil-laden tankers was established after the Exxon Valdez oil spill to provide a key layer of safety and prevention for tankers carrying crude oil from the terminus of the Trans-Alaska Pipeline in Valdez, Alaska to domestic and foreign ports and refineries.

The current dual escort vessel system for tankers is operated by the oil industry as described in the Prince William Sound Vessel Escort and Response Plan (VERP). Under the current system, at least two high-powered, state-of-the-art towing vessels escort all oil-laden tankers through Prince William Sound, ready to provide assistance to a tanker in trouble, before a spill can occur. The escort vessels serve as lookouts for dangerous conditions, are available to assist the tanker if it should run into problems, and can provide ready response in the event that an oil spill does occur.

The dual (two tug) escort system has been in place for nearly two decades; during that time, there have been no major oil tanker spills in Prince William Sound. The current dual tug escort system, required by the Oil Pollution Act of 1990 (OPA90), is a proven oil spill prevention system. OPA90 mandates dual tug escorts for all single-hull oil tankers. Therefore, the tug escort requirements will no longer apply after single-hull tankers are replaced by double-hull tankers. OPA90 does require tugs for oil spill response, and those requirements do not sunset. Without Congressional action to make dual tug escorts a permanent requirement, the continued use of tug escorts for double-hull tankers would hinge on voluntary compliance once the sunset provisions of OPA90 have taken effect. The sunset provisions could take effect as early as 2010, depending upon the makeup of the tanker fleet loading oil at the Valdez Marine Terminal.

Dual tug escorts provide a critically important safety measure for double-hull tankers. Double-hull tankers, in and of themselves, do not guarantee the prevention of another highly destructive oil spill. Even the newest double-hull tankers with redundant propulsion and steering systems are not indestructible. As evidenced by shipping accidents that continue to occur around the world each year, humans that operate oil tankers are not infallible. Double hulls can reduce the amount of oil lost once a spill occurs; however, improved technologies, redundant systems, and enhanced automation cannot eliminate oil spills caused by human errors, failure of major engineered systems, aberrant weather, or other unforeseen events. And, not all of the double-hull tankers operating in Prince William Sound are equipped with

the newer, redundant propulsion and steering systems, so they have an even narrower margin for error.

The dual tug escort system provides an irreplaceable component of oil spill prevention that cannot be peeled away without exposing the fragile, slowly recovering communities, fisheries, and ecosystems of Prince William Sound and the rest of the 1989 oil spill region to an increased risk of another catastrophic environmental insult, from which they may never recover. With the 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Exxon Valdez oil spill (EVOS), in March 2009, the United States was reminded of the need to be ever vigilant in protecting the waters of Prince William Sound and the rest of the oil spill region through oil spill prevention. Helping to ensure that the dual tug escort system continues to protect Prince William Sound and the rest of the oil spill region is a responsibility of the Prince William Sound Regional Citizens' Advisory Council and is critical to the Council's mission of "citizens promoting environmentally safe operation of the Alyeska terminal and associated tankers."



The Exxon Valdez oil spill provided an indelible reminder of the damage that marine oil spills can cause. The oil coated beaches, killed fish, birds, and other wildlife, injured fish and wildlife habitat, and sent local economies into a tailspin. The oil spill ruined lives and livelihoods, and interrupted the transport of a key source of oil in the United States. The oil spill seriously damaged fisheries, subsistence, tourism, and recreation and devastated the many Alaska Native and non-Native communities. Oiled populations of birds, otter, fish and shellfish species have taken years to recover. Some still

have not come back.

The Exxon Valdez oil spill region cannot tolerate another major oil spill. Yet, the critical safety and prevention system that has been in place for the last twenty years is in danger of being reduced or eliminated. In order ensure that the Prince William Sound dual escort vessel system remains in place beyond 2010, Congress needs to amend the Oil Pollution Act of 1990. In October 2009, the House of Representatives passed H.R. 3619, the Coast Guard Authorization Bill, which includes a provision to amend the Oil Pollution Act of 1990 to require that **all laden oil tankers**, including those with double hulls, be accompanied by two escort vessels through Prince William Sound.

Now, the Senate must also take action. The bill S.1041 was introduced by U.S. Senators Lisa Murkowski and Mark Begich on May 14, 2009 to ensure that dual escort vessels will *continue* to accompany all oil-laden tankers, including double-hull tankers, in Prince William Sound. The passage of S. 1041 is essential to maintaining the dual escort marine vessel safety system currently utilized in Prince William Sound.

This briefing booklet provides background information on how the dual escort vessel system operates and why its continuation is so critically important to protecting Alaska's people, its natural resources, and the continued safe transport of its oil supply, as well as the rest of our nation, from the debilitating effects of another catastrophic oil spill.