

Stan Jones
Director of External Affairs
907.273.6230
jones@pwsrca.org

Guest Opinion

February 8, 2006

Nikiski tanker grounding shows need for escort tugs, value of double hulls

By Stan Stephens
President, Prince William Sound Citizens' Advisory Council

No doubt it will be several weeks or months before we reach a full understanding of what went wrong at Nikiski on Feb. 2 when ice floes pushed the tanker *Seabulk Pride* away from Tesoro's refinery dock and it grounded on a nearby Cook Inlet beach.

But two lessons seem abundantly clear already.

One is, the tankers carrying crude oil and refined products through Cook Inlet should be accompanied by escort tugs, just as they are in Prince William Sound.

In Prince William Sound, it took the *Exxon Valdez* oil spill to bring about the escort system we have today, widely regarded as the best in the world.

But there is no excuse for waiting for a similar environmental catastrophe in Cook Inlet before an escort system is established. Our sister organization, the Cook Inlet Regional Citizens' Advisory Council, has long called for escort tugs there, and we at the Prince William Sound council have always supported them in that position.

Work should begin immediately to determine the optimal escort system for Cook Inlet and it should be brought online with all possible speed. In the interim, we feel, some combination of escort requirements and operating restrictions during periods of heavy winter ice should be adopted to make sure another incident doesn't start out like the *Seabulk Pride* grounding but end up far worse.

There will likely be cries from the oil industry that an escort system will be too expensive, but that's no excuse. The industry offered similar arguments when citizens called for tug escorts in the early days of the oil trade in Prince William Sound. That complacency was shattered when the *Exxon Valdez* spill and the ensuing multi-billion-dollar cleanup made it clear that the real cost lies in being unprepared.

The other lesson from the Nikiski incident is that Congress was exceedingly wise after the *Exxon Valdez* spill when it heeded citizen calls for double-hull requirements and incorporated them in the Oil Pollution Act of 1990 (which also mandated the citizens' councils for Prince William Sound and Cook Inlet).

For those who haven't followed this issue closely, "double hull" refers to the practice of constructing a tanker with two hulls separated by several feet of space. Only the outer hull is in contact with the sea, and only the inner hull is in contact with the cargo of oil, refined products, or other toxic chemicals.

If such a tanker goes aground and the outer hull is penetrated, the buffer of empty space means that, in most cases, the inner hull is untouched and no oil is spilled.

And that is exactly what happened at Nikiski. The *Seabulk Pride* grounding started at high tide the morning of Feb. 2, meaning the vessel was subjected to the rise and fall of two full high-low tidal cycles before it was pulled off the beach early on the morning of Feb. 3. During that time, the outer hull near the ship's bow developed two cracks, apparently from grinding against a boulder on the beach. Those cracks allowed water to leak into the space between the hulls, meaning oil would almost certainly have leaked out had the *Seabulk Pride* had only a single hull.

The *Seabulk Pride* grounding proves the status quo in Cook Inlet is utterly unacceptable. Disaster was averted this time, but luck played a large role in that outcome. If the boulder under the *Seabulk Pride* had been bigger, or if the tanker had stayed on it longer, we could have had a catastrophic oil spill with the same kind of damage to the environment, to the fishing and tourism industries, and to communities, that we saw 17 years ago after the *Exxon Valdez* spill.

All stakeholders – the U.S. Coast Guard, the state of Alaska, the citizens, and the companies that produce, refine and ship oil – should resolve today to do what is needed to see that Cook Inlet and its environmental and commercial treasures are as well protected as Prince William Sound.

####

Stan Stephens is president of the Prince William Sound Regional Citizens' Advisory Council, 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.