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News Release

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Citizens' group calls for dispersants ban in Prince William Sound

The board of directors of the Prince William Sound Regional Citizens' Advisory Council this week voted to oppose any use of chemical dispersants for responding to North Slope crude oil spills in Prince William Sound and other areas affected by the Exxon Valdez oil spill of 1989.

The action came May 3 in Valdez at a regular meeting of the board and was taken at the recommendation of its Scientific Advisory Committee and a project team set up to examine the issue.

Previously, the council position was that dispersants could be used on an oil spill as a last resort if mechanical recovery efforts with booms and skimmers proved ineffective.

With this week's action, the council is now on record as opposing dispersant use in the Exxon oil-spill region under any circumstances.

In theory, chemical dispersants do as their name implies: they disperse surface oil into the water column, thereby diluting it, preventing it from fouling shorelines, and speeding up the process by which bacterial action renders it harmless.

But, the council concluded, years of research have failed to bear out the claims of dispersant proponents.

"Until such time as chemical dispersant effectiveness is demonstrated in our region and shown to minimize adverse effects on the environment, the council does not support dispersant use as an oil spill response option," the new position states.

"This puts the responsibility back where it belongs," said Connie Stephens, a board member from Valdez. "Until you can prove to me it works, I don't want it in there."

The ban comes after the council has spent years observing dispersant trials, reviewing dispersant research, and sponsoring independent research of its own. Most recently, the council commissioned a report called "Stability and Resurfacing of Dispersed Oil," by Dr. Merv Fingas, a Canadian scientist and world-renowned authority on dispersants.

Dispersants require a considerable level of wave activity in order to work. Resurfacing refers to the fact that, if the waves subside, the oil may un-disperse and return to the surface in an oil-dispersant mixture that may be even harder to clean up than untreated oil.

After reviewing and analyzing the Fingas report, the council's science committee concluded that resurfacing "has not been well-defined or studied. A common argument for the use of chemical dispersants is to keep oil off of environmentally sensitive areas. However, due to the potential of resurfacing, impacts cannot be so well defined. Oil may simply resurface and impact another environmentally sensitive area."

"No experimental or sea-trial evidence exists that indicates the common dispersants stockpiled in Alaska will be very effective in combating Alaska North Slope crude oil spilled in Prince William Sound," the committee said in its summary of the Fingas report. (The report is available on the council website at www.pwsrccac.org/docs/d0026200.pdf.)

"Our objective in taking this action is to precipitate a change in policy by industry and the regulatory community by which dispersant use would be removed from the toolbox indefinitely," said Steve Lewis, a board member from Seldovia. "We cannot resume support for the use of dispersants until the basic questions of efficacy, toxicity and fate of dispersants and chemically dispersed (North Slope) crude oil are unequivocally determined through sound and universally acceptable research."

The Prince William Sound Regional Citizens' Advisory Council 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 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.