

The 'Exxon Valdez' disaster

Twenty-five years ago, the *Exxon Valdez* ran aground in Alaska, spilling hundreds of thousands of barrels of crude oil and triggering an environmental catastrophe. **Tony Moore** looks back at the events of 1989

This was one of the most devastating human-caused environmental disasters to have occurred. Until the *Deepwater Horizon* disaster in 2010, it was the largest oil spill ever in US waters in terms of the volume of oil released. It had a calamitous effect on the local economy and livelihoods.

It is estimated, conservatively, that the immediate effects of the spill resulted in the deaths of around 250,000 sea birds, 2,800 sea otters, 300 harbour seals, 247 bald eagles and 22 killer whales. Over 2,000 Alaskan Native Americans and 13,000 other subsistence permit holders lost their food source. This continues today, as many are afraid of being poisoned by contaminated fish.

Tourism immediately lost over 26,000 jobs and more than \$2.4 (€1.7) billion in sales. Although it has recovered somewhat, many potential tourists still regard this as a contaminated area. Several residents, including one former mayor, committed suicide and four people died during clean-up operations.

The *Exxon Valdez* left the Port of Valdez in Alaska at 21:12hrs on March 23, 1989, with a cargo of 53 million US gallons of crude oil, bound for Los Angeles, California. She was manoeuvred through the Valdez Narrows by an expert pilot hired for that purpose but, once through, he left the vessel under the command of the captain, Joe Hazelwood. Because of icebergs in the normal shipping lanes, Hazelwood ordered the helmsman to take the tanker out of the lanes but as soon as it was clear of the icebergs, told him to re-join the normal route; the captain then went below to his quarters. For reasons that are not clear, the tanker did not re-join the shipping lanes and, at 12:04hrs on March 24, she struck Bligh Reef in Prince William Sound, spilling almost 11 million gallons of crude oil into the sea within six hours of the incident.

Sensitive areas, such as seal pupping locations and fish hatcheries, were quickly identified as a priority in the clean-up. However, adequate resources did not reach the relatively remote scene quickly enough. As a consequence, wildlife rescue



Above: Aerial image of an omni-barge as spill workers hose a beach on Prince William Sound in the wake of the oil spill.

Below: Beach clean-up workers use pompoms to try to remove the oil

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was slow and many birds and mammals died, either through direct contact with oil or because of a loss of food resources.

Although more than 11,000 personnel, 1,400 vessels and 85 aircraft were involved at the height of the response, Exxon was heavily criticised for the way it handled the disaster. Initial attempts to disperse the slick were hampered by a lack of suitable equipment and personnel and unfavourable weather.

On the advice of Exxon's legal team, the company refused to acknowledge the extent of the problem. The CEO, Lawrence Rawl, waited six days to make a statement to the media and did not visit the scene of the incident until nearly three weeks after.

The clean-up was undertaken over four summers but a survey undertaken in 2007 found that a substantial amount of oil remained in the sandy soil of the contaminated shoreline. Exxon spent over \$3.8 (€2.8) billion in cleaning up the site, compensating 11,000 residents and in fines.

A subsequent investigation by the National Transportation Safety Board (NTSB) highlighted five contributory causes for the grounding. Firstly, the third mate failed to manoeuvre the vessel properly, possibly due to fatigue and excessive workload. Between 1977 and 1989, the crew of the tanker had been reduced by 50 per cent; members had to work 12-14

hour shifts plus overtime. The crew had been extremely busy loading the crude oil onto the vessel prior to leaving the Port of Valdez. The Board found this to be widespread throughout the industry and made recommendations to rectify this. Captain Hazelwood failed to provide a proper navigation watch. Although there were allegations that he had been drinking and was asleep in his cabin at the time *Exxon Valdez* ran aground, a jury in Alaska found him not guilty of operating a vessel while under the influence of alcohol.

Insufficiencies

The owners of the vessel had failed to supervise Captain Hazelwood and provide a rested and sufficient crew for the vessel. Also, the US Coastguard had failed to provide an effective vessel traffic system. Finally, there was a lack of an effective pilot and escort service.

The Governor of Alaska subsequently issued an executive order requiring two tugboats to escort every tanker from Port Valdez out through Prince William Sound to Hinchinbrook Entrance, which is where it meets the Gulf of Alaska. **CRJ**

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