

18th anniversary of Exxon Valdez oil spill prompts review

by Bend_Weekly_News_Sources

As the eighteenth anniversary of the 1989 Exxon Valdez oil spill approaches on Saturday, March 24, World Wildlife Fund and Shipping Safety Partnership (SSP) issued a call to Alaska's leaders and the U.S. Coast Guard to take immediate action to address gaps in shipping safety reform in the North Pacific, specifically, along the Great Circle Route. The Exxon Valdez spilled more than 11 million gallons of oil into Prince William Sound.

Cleanup of the Exxon Valdez oil spill 18 years ago

Just days before the Valdez anniversary, the fishing vessel Exodus Explorer grounded and sank on Sunday morning, March 18, near Adak Island in the Western Aleutians. Last week, Alaska witnessed a close call off the shores of America's busiest fishing port, Dutch Harbor, when the Salico Frigo, a 443-foot freighter came within minutes of grounding in Unalaska Bay.

Other near misses include the Sea Honesty (2006) and the Cougar Ace (2006), a Singapore-based freighter that almost capsized during ballast water exchange and was reached by a tug 189 hours later to be towed to Unalaska Island. In Cook Inlet, the Seabulk Pride was ripped from its moorings in 2006 by severe ice conditions. Today, neither the Aleutians nor Cook Inlet has a sufficient tug stationed in the regions to respond to emergencies.

"There are efforts underway now to address these needs, however, it cannot happen soon enough. There are only so many second chances in a place as rough and wild as the Aleutians," said Margaret Williams, director of WWF's Bering Sea program in Anchorage.

WWF and SSP called for tug boats to be stationed in Cook Inlet and Unimak Pass as an interim measure until a more comprehensive assessment is complete, which they anticipate will demonstrate a need to station more than one tug in America's most pristine and wild archipelago. The organizations also called for year-round, constant tracking of U.S. and foreign vessels as both a security and environmental measure.

While Prince William Sound is now recognized worldwide for having comprehensive measures to address oil spills, similar reforms do not exist in other regions of Alaska, leaving them inadequately protected, say WWF and SSP.

"We learned our lesson the hard way in Prince William Sound, and now have 10 large tugs for one tanker a day, and a state-of-the-art tracking system. But the Aleutian region has 15 to 20 large vessels pass through each day, some of them oil tankers, and not one adequate rescue tug nor a vessel tracking system. This risk is unacceptable," said Richard Steiner, professor and conservation specialist of the Marine Advisory Program at University of Alaska Anchorage.

