

Alaska Wilderness League * Defenders of Wildlife * Earthjustice * Oceana * World Wildlife Fund

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Twenty Years Later: Lingering Effects of Exxon Valdez Disaster Spur Calls to Protect Alaska's Bristol Bay and Arctic Region *Congressional testimony and letter to Obama administration highlight lessons learned*

WASHINGTON - Twenty years ago today, the Exxon Valdez oil tanker slammed into the jagged rocks of Bligh Reef in Prince William Sound, Alaska and caused one of the worst environmental disasters in our nation's history. As Alaskans and all Americans look back on this disastrous spill two decades later – and assess lingering effects expected to last decades, perhaps centuries – many are urging Congress and the Obama administration to protect Alaska's Arctic and Bristol Bay and ensure that the Exxon Valdez story is never again repeated.

Appearing before a joint congressional oversight hearing today, Captain Keith Colburn, a crab fisherman from Bristol Bay who is star of the Discovery Channel hit series *Deadliest Catch*, and Dr. Jeffrey Short of Oceana, an internationally recognized expert on oil impacts to the ocean, respectively are testifying about the need to protect productive Bristol Bay fisheries from oil exploration - and institute a timeout on industrial activity in the fragile Arctic ecosystem until a comprehensive conservation and energy plan can be developed.

In addition, each member of the congressional subcommittees will receive a jar of rocks collected last month by World Wildlife Fund from the shores of Prince William Sound to demonstrate the lasting impacts of the spill. Two decades after the accident, the rocks remain coated in oil.

“Twenty years after the Exxon Valdez spill, oil is still fouling Alaska's beaches, and we still have no good way to clean up an oil spill in the oceans,” said Dr. Jeffrey Short, who spent two decades studying the impacts of the Exxon Valdez spill and is currently Pacific Science Director of Oceana. “The threat is particularly dire in the Arctic, where climate change is causing warming at twice the rate of the rest of the planet and where oil leasing has occurred.

We must take a comprehensive look at energy and our oceans and make decisions based on sound science.”

Oceana is releasing a new analysis today that describes in detail the true costs of U.S. reliance on oil and offers an alternative way forward for U.S. energy policy. (*For more information visit www.oceana.org*)

Also today, 67 members of Congress are sending a letter to President Obama that calls for “science-based precautionary management” for America’s Arctic and designates certain areas, such as the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge and priority conservation areas within the National Petroleum Reserve – Alaska, off limits from oil and gas development. The letter urges the Obama administration to slow the Bush administration’s rush to lease the Arctic Ocean for oil and gas development. (*See letter at <http://www.alaskawild.org/arcticletter>*)

“We commend every member of Congress who signed this important letter to the new administration. President Obama unfortunately inherited a deeply-flawed development strategy for the Arctic. We’re optimistic that the new administration, working together with Congress and stakeholder groups, will take a precautionary approach in managing the Arctic; thereby avoiding a future catastrophe like the one that befell Prince William Sound 20 years ago today,” said Sean Babington of Earthjustice.

On March 24, 1989, the Exxon Valdez spilled nearly 11 million gallons of crude oil across 11,000 square miles of ocean. Approximately 21,000 gallons of oil still remain in the Sound – lingering oil also has been found on the Katmai coast and Kenai peninsula over 450 miles away. In some places, the leftover oil remains nearly as toxic as it was in the first few weeks after the spill, according to the Exxon Valdez Oil Spill Trustee Council’s 2009 report. And experts believe that it will take decades, or centuries, for the oil to disappear entirely.

Beyond the initial damage of the spill (which included 250,000 sea birds, 1,000 sea otters and 151 bald eagles), the long-term effects on the region’s wildlife are still not understood. Some wildlife populations, such as one pod of killer whales, have yet to recover, and the Pacific herring population – that once drove the region’s economy – is still too low to sustain a commercial fishery.

“They said it couldn’t happen. It did. They say it’s all cleaned up. It isn’t. They say it won’t happen in America’s Arctic. Who are they kidding?” said Kristen Miller, government affairs director of Alaska Wilderness League. “Congress and the Obama administration must act now to protect America’s Arctic and Bristol Bay. Twenty years from now, I hope we won’t see an Arctic region or Bristol Bay that bear the deep, immeasurable wounds of today’s Prince William Sound.”

The Arctic region is already under immense stress from the impacts of climate change – warming in the Arctic is occurring at twice the rate of the rest of the planet. Arctic wildlife, including the threatened polar bear, endangered bowhead whale, ribbon seal and Pacific walrus, are increasingly at risk. Alaska Natives, who have sustained themselves for thousands of years on the land and waters of the Arctic, have expressed concern as these resources and their way of life becomes increasingly imperiled.

Currently, there are close to 100 million acres across America's Arctic open for oil and gas development. Even as more areas are opened to development – right now, 73.4 million acres in the Arctic Ocean are in the process of being offered for lease, the largest blocks of Arctic waters yet to be offered – the Arctic remains the “least studied and most poorly understood area on Earth,” according to the U.S. Arctic Research Commission. Thus, the environmental and social impacts of oil and gas development have been poorly studied and documented.

Despite the very real risk of an oil spill in the Arctic Ocean – the federal government has calculated up to a 50 percent chance of a large oil spill in the Chukchi Sea alone – no technology exists to clean up a spill in the Arctic's icy conditions.

“While new regulations are in place regarding response to oil spill disasters in the last 20 years, the Arctic itself has changed considerably and is much more vulnerable today,” said Margaret Williams, managing director of World Wildlife Fund's Alaska program. “Sea ice is disappearing and open water seasons are lasting longer, creating a frenzy to stake claims on the Arctic's rich resources – especially oil and gas development.”

Proposed oil and gas lease sales in Bristol Bay were offered during the eight years of the Bush administration. Known as “America's fish basket,” Bristol Bay and the larger Bering Sea are home to nearly half the seafood caught in the U.S. – a \$2.2 billion annual fishery. By comparison, oil and gas drilling is expected to bring in just \$7.7 billion total over the entire 25-40 years experts believe it will take to fully extract the resources.

“Before the first supertanker sailed out of Prince William Sound, assurances were given about the great new foolproof technology that would prevent any oil spill. We are hearing almost identical reassurances today, telling us not to worry about the risk of spills from proposed offshore drilling rigs amidst the rich fisheries of Bristol Bay, in the fragile waters of the Arctic, along the U.S. Atlantic coast, and off California's beaches,” said Richard Charter, government relations consultant with Defenders of Wildlife. “Human error and mechanical failure will never go away, just like the spilled Exxon Valdez oil has not gone away and is still poisoning Alaskan waters. We need to learn from the disasters of the past or we will continue to repeat them.”

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