

More Than 100 Oil Spills Contaminated Waters—

Commissioner Max Brewer Says Small Oil Spills Need to Be Taken Seriously

JUNEAU—Last year more than 100 oil spills contaminated Alaska's waters; none was massive but according to Max Brewer, commissioner of environmental conservation, each was an ecological timebomb loaded with potential for significant damage to the environment.

Brewer believes that the recent public awareness regarding large oil spills is a "tremendously healthy sign," but he is concerned that the "small spill problem" often has been dismissed by some as being insignificant.

"After all, a series of what could be labeled 'small spills' is the cause of the world's biggest oil pollution problem. Two-thirds of all the oil contaminating the world's waters today is entering those waters through sewers," Brewer said.

Another category of "mini spills" which worries Brewer is

the inshore spill.

"We must become aware of the fact that the small inshore spill—in the 25- to 50-gallon range—probably causes more environmental damage than the 1,000-gallon spill out to sea," he said.

The spills at sea tend to dissipate over wide areas; the small inshore spills "get the shellfish and the fish fry just entering the sea and contaminate the beaches of small boat harbors," Brewer said.

Department records show that many of the small inshore spills occur during fueling operations of vessels, such as fishing boats and pleasure craft.

It is the result of carelessness and both the fishing boat operator and the fuel distributor share the responsibility and liability—the distributor because he transfers the fueling hose to the vessel's crew, the boat operator because he carries out the fueling operation.

"We've found that those Alaskans who should be most concerned about oil pollution,

such as fishermen and boating enthusiasts, are causing serious water pollution problems in the environmentally critical area of the sea, without being aware of the damage they are inflicting on the environment, their livelihood, or their pleasure," Brewer said.

When the manager of a packing company recently was called in to explain why an oil spill had occurred as one of his firm's boats was being refueled, he expressed surprise that the Dept. of Environmental Conservation was concerned about the incident.

After discussions with depart-

ment officials, the packing company manager said "I always knew oil pollution was bad for the environment and the fishing industry, but I never realized that I was a potential polluter."

Brewer believes this incident points out the ecological naivete which exists throughout the state.

"I think it's time to abandon the numbers game and penchant for concern only about the large oil spill," Brewer said. "We must realize that all of us are potential polluters and take steps to eliminate small petroleum spills caused by carelessness."