

Cleaning up spill easier said than done

by Pete Leathard
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Cleaning up the largest oil spill in North American history is easier said than done.

Exxon's written plan has been approved by the Coast Guard. To turn that plan into action is a huge undertaking for Exxon's general contractor, VECO.

OPINION

The responsibility for determining the environmental method by which beaches are to be cleaned rests with others, but now that that direction has been given to VECO, with the support of Alaskan employees and businesses, we have no doubt we can perform even better than the plan requires when it comes to providing people, facilities and support to clean up the oil.

We are already ahead of schedule in providing equipment and personnel. Although we don't think it necessary, if required, we could even double the effort specified in the plan utilizing Alaskans and in-state supplies.

Exxon's directive has been to provide community residents with the ability to respond in whatever way became necessary to protect themselves from the effects of the spill. That requires providing a means to purchase materials, mobilize equipment and hire personnel.

It's unusual for VECO to be criti-

cized for hiring Alaskans, yet some have raised such criticism. Wherever possible we have, indeed, hired residents who live in affected communities to act as local representatives. They are most familiar with the surroundings and existing resources.

The majority of employees, whether union or non-union, are being paid \$16.69, the union wage specified in the Trans-Alaska Pipeline Maintenance Agreement for oil spill laborers. We believed this was the only fair way to treat workers required to perform the same work under similar conditions.

Unions are providing workers through VECO Inc.'s subcontractor, NORCON. As the project progresses, it's planned to keep a reasonable parity between union and non-union workers.

To provide offshore shelter for the nearly 2,000 workers located in Prince William Sound, a flotilla of 13 ships ranging from floating barge camps and cruise vessels to seafood processors has been mobilized in ports across Alaska.

The total project employment will exceed 4,000 people considering rotating schedules.

Our primary concern from day one has been the safety of employees. Prince William Sound can be one of the most beautiful and calm regions in Alaska, but the winds from the Gulf of Alaska can whip the seas into one of the harshest environments in which to survive. No beach is worth the loss of a human life.

Our goal has been to ensure every

worker is properly clothed and receives basic safety training. Before sending workers out, we had the oil analyzed to ensure there were no unknown toxic effects. A staff of medical technicians and helicopters are on-call 24 hours a day to respond in an emergency.

VECO coordinated efforts to bring in the Soviet skimmer ship, *Vaydagubsky*, to assist with the cleanup. The ship is now on-site, utilizing some of the most advanced equipment designed to clean up oil spills on the open ocean.

Close coordination has been maintained with the Chugach Alaska Corp. Native coordinators are located in all villages to ensure problems are resolved.

Among those problems has been the disruption of normal food and fuel deliveries. To remedy the problem, food is being provided to residents of Chenega Bay, Tatitlek, English Bay and Port Graham at no cost while fuel is being provided as well in Chenega Bay and Tatitlek.

Pens and shelters are being built to assist wildlife recovery and assistance efforts. To ensure adequate availability of any supplies needed for the wildlife rescue and rehabilitation effort, workers are utilizing local merchants in various communities and, with approval, charging expenses directly to VECO and Exxon.

Under Exxon's direction, materials, supplies and equipment for all phases of the cleanup are being purchased from businesses within the communities. Materials staging and major shipments of supplies are being coor-

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minated at VECO's leased space at the Port of Anchorage.

Outside purchases are limited to those items which cannot be found in sufficient quantities, and, even then, purchases are coordinated whenever possible through local outlets.

Alaskan legal, accounting and insurance firms have been contracted to ensure proper administration of the cleanup.

It's unfortunate that money has to be spent on such a disastrous event, but it's fortunate that Exxon is working to ensure the indirect benefits which result from the cleanup effort accrue to Alaskans as they should.

The fact that Exxon is using an Alaskan contractor, VECO, as the prime contractor to implement the cleanup plan will ensure local Alaskans receive the benefits they deserve from their efforts.