



We're not better off with oil

by Paul Swetzof
for the Tundra Times

For more than a decade the oil companies have spent large sums of money on advertising to snooker us into believing that they are good neighbors, environmentally sound neighbors and personal friends with Native people and all other Alaskans.

At the same time the advertising was running, they spent large amounts of money fighting against environmental safeguards.

OPINION

Now comes a major oil spill in one of the most environmentally sensitive areas in the world. Chenega Bay and Tatitlek, two Aleut villages located in Prince William Sound, will be heavily affected by the loss of subsistence fish and wildlife. The commercial fisheries for these villages and other fishing towns are in jeopardy.

The first commercial opening of the season, for Sablefish, has already been canceled. The spring herring fishery has been canceled.

Alyeska Pipeline Service Co., which represents all of the oil companies producing oil on the North Slope, has promised and assured us for years that they were equipped and ready to deal with any major or minor oil spill. As we all know by now, that was not true.

The major problem in Prince William Sound, as bad as it is, was not the fact that a drunken captain allowed his ship to hit a reef and leak much of its oil. The big problem is that the oil companies, represented by Alyeska Pipeline Service Co. including Exxon, were not prepared for a spill, as they stated they were. And they showed little concern when a spill occurred.

The spill happened at a time when the weather, for a change, was very cooperative. It remained cooperative for a couple of days. The sun was shining, the winds were out of the North, and the seas were calm.

Everything was right for cleaning up a major portion of the spill. Alyeska and Exxon shipping failed to act.

Companies in Alaska immediately contacted Alyeska and Exxon offering to supply them with absorbent booms to contain and clean up the oil. This cleanup and containment equipment could have been on line in Valdez within 24 hours.

The oil companies turned the Alaska companies down.

It took more than a week to decide to hire workers to try and clean up the 1 to 3 inches of oil that were invading the wildlife rich islands of the sound.

By the time equipment was on hand, the oil had covered hundreds of square miles. The consistency of the oil had become such that it became difficult, even impossible, to clean the junk up.

To add insult to injury, Alyeska, while the oil was still leaking, formally requested a lessening of oil pollution standards in Prince William Sound. Finally, the town of Cordova emptied its entire treasury to pay for some cleanup effort, and fishermen took matters in their own hands and began to place booms around particularly sensitive areas.

For years the city of Valdez has offered storage space to store booms, absorbents and other cleanup equipment necessary to deal with a major spill. Alyeska turned the city down, stating it had the capability to deal with a spill.

Over a decade ago the oil companies were fighting fishermen and other responsible Alaskans. The oil companies wanted a pipeline to tidewater so they could transfer the oil directly to tankers.

The oil companies agreed to have state of the art containment and cleanup equipment on hand, in quan-

ties needed to clean up a major spill. They also touted double bottom tankers. Well, we never got double bottom tankers, and as we now know, we never got much of anything.

After the spill the only action Alyeska and Exxon took was a massive public relations blitz.

Now they are trying to divert attention to the captain of the ship, ignoring the fact that it is their inaction and insensitivity which is the cause of the real disaster.

Over the last decade there have been a number of small leaks. The response and cleanup in many of these small tundra spills was inadequate.

Are we better off today than before Prudhoe Bay? I don't believe so. There is more money, but that's about it. The quality of our lives has gone downhill. The oil fueled population boom put severe strains on our subsistence and commercial resources.

Pollution threatens our land, fish and wildlife. Many of those who followed the money to Alaska have fought Native sovereignty, subsistence and other Native concerns. I think our quality of life and our way of life is much more important than the transient income from the oil companies.

Like many other people, I'm wearing a black armband. I urge my readers to do the same. This represents our concern and outrage over the loss of fish, wildlife and habitat caused by the oil companies in Prince William Sound and other areas of Alaska.

It reminds people we don't want and can't afford to drill in the middle of the richest salmon fishery in the world, Bristol Bay.

This expresses our unwillingness to trust the fate of the migratory caribou herd in the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge to the oil companies. Your black armband is a statement that you won't take any more abuse from these companies and the people who run them.