

Spill changes Chenega into disaster base

Village swells to 250

by Jennifer Gordon

Tundra Times reporter

Two weeks after the largest oil spill in the nation's history, the Prince William Sound village of Chenega has been transformed from a quiet fishing village to an emergency base camp.

"We've been inundated by anyone and everyone," said Darrell Totemoff, administrative assistant for the Chenega Bay Village Council. The population of the village has increased from under 80 people to about 250.

Totemoff said that helicopters have been landing regularly, as reporters from London, Australia and the national networks converge on the site.

The village has been visited by a number of specialists from the Department of Environmental Conservation and the Alaska Department of Fish and Game. Totemoff said Dennis Kelso, DEC commissioner, used the village council office for a meeting.

Workers trying to keep oil from the water around the San Juan fishery have also set up camp in Chenega. Salmon fry in the fishery were about to be released to the sea when the oil spill occurred. Totemoff said that oil was so thick near the fishery that it was going under the booms. Other reports said that oil was detected in the water column as deep as 90 feet.

"We're all too busy to be depressed right now," said Totemoff. He said everyone is in shock and that they are

(Continued on Page Thirteen)

• Good Friday disaster

(Continued from Page One)

confused by the activity in the village. He said even though their tiny village is the center of so much activity, the best way to figure out what is going on is to watch the news.

"Seems like Good Friday brought us another disaster," Totemoff said.

He was referring to the fact that the village of Chenega was destroyed in the Good Friday earthquake of 1964, 25 years before the oil tanker *Exxon Valdez* hit Bligh Reef and spilled more than 10 million gallons of oil into Prince William Sound.

A handful of the village leaders spent years working to find a way to rebuild their home, and after about 20 years they were finally successful in that effort, Totemoff said.

Dick Rolland, deputy director of North Pacific Rim, said that ironically, one of the most needed items in Chenega right now is fuel. He said that the introduction of more phone lines in the village means more power is needed from the generators.

Rolland said a runway is also needed to allow regular small planes to land. Helicopters and sea planes have dominated the scene, along with boats, but Rolland said the runway is essential to get supplies in and out quickly. He said they hope to get Exxon to help with the cost of the runway.

The children of Chenega have also been affected by the oil spill. Rolland said that parents are strained emotionally, and because of the intense workload they just don't have as much time for family activities. He said more child care is needed in the village.

Public safety and health has become a concern, Rolland said, because there are so many people working in such a small area, and many of them are not experienced in working with emergencies. He said the village should be prepared to take care of injuries or be able to fly someone out quickly.

Rolland said that with all the work that has been done to save the San Juan fishery, little has been done to protect the subsistence hunting land around the village.

Deer have been reported dead in the area, and while the cause has not been determined, it is suspected that they ate oil covered seaweed. The deer are a major food source for the subsistence villagers in the sound.

Rolland said that for now food isn't a problem. Exxon has been contracted to cater food into the village. Also, he said North Pacific Rim has been flying in the essentials — soap, toilet paper and other needed items.

The biggest problem in the village now is coordination. Rolland said it is next to impossible to call Valdez, and while people keep promising money, he has his doubts.

North Pacific Rim filed a lawsuit Wednesday against Exxon asking for

On Wednesday, The North Pacific Rim filed a lawsuit against Exxon and the Alyeska Pipeline Service Co. The lawsuit was in behalf of itself and the Native villages in the Chugach Alaska region that have been or could be affected by the oil spill.

Villages include Tatitlek, Chenega, Eyak, English Bay and Port Graham. The Mount Marathon Native Association and the Valdez Native Association, both non-profit organizations, are also represented in the lawsuit.

Mike Chittick, president and chief executive officer of Chugach Alaska Inc., said that the corporation owns two fish processing plants in Cordova. He said that it is immaterial that the oil is not in Cordova. The southwest part of the sound is known as the heaviest fishing area, and losses will be seen back at the plants, he said.

ADF&G closed the herring season in the sound only days before it opened. Black cod season was to open April 1, but was also cancelled. The pot shrimp season was also closed early.

Chittick said that these seasons don't bring in enough to support the fishermen in the sound. He explained, however, that the fishermen use the money from the herring and cod seasons to get ready for the salmon season. Without that money, the fishermen who are shareholders of Chugach Alaska may turn to the corporation for loans.

JoAnn Carr, Chittick's executive assistant, said that the corporation loans money to the fishermen at the beginning of the season and deducts the loans when the corporation buys the fish. If the salmon run is weak, many loans may go unpaid, she said, which will hurt Chugach Alaska and its shareholders.