

Tanker struck reef shortly after midnight

by Jennifer Gordon

Tundra Times reporter

Shortly after midnight, on the morning of Good Friday, the oil tanker *Exxon Valdez* struck Bligh Reef in the Prince William Sound, spilling disaster into its pristine waters.

By Thursday afternoon, the tanker, which is stuck about 25 miles out of Valdez, had spilled more than 11 million gallons of oil into the sound, covering an area of about 600 square miles.

The spill is being called the worst in United States' history.

Gov. Steve Cowper issued a state disaster declaration on March 26 and asked for federal assistance. The Bush administration said Thursday, however, that federal involvement in the cleanup might slow the process further and elected to stand by and monitor the situation. Exxon has said it will pay for the cleanup and all damages occurring from the spill.

At the time of the wreck, the tanker was being run by Third Mate Greg Cousins, who was uncertified to steer the ship through the Valdez Arm. Capt. Joseph Hazelwood was certified to steer the ship, but was not at the helm at the time of the incident. By Thursday, the results of blood tests revealed that the captain was intox-

icated. He was immediately fired by Exxon.

Winds, which raced up to 70 knots March 27, made cleanup difficult for the Coast Guard and Exxon. The wind kept planes from dropping dispersant into the area and blew the oil into a froth, which did not stay within oil booms.

As cleanup became more delayed, volatile oils evaporated from the crude, turning it into a sticky goo that defied dispersants and burning.

Greg Kellogg, acting assistant regional administrator for the Environmental Protection Agency in Alaska, said Tuesday that the village of Tatitlek was being kept clean by defensive booming efforts of the Department of Environmental Conservation.

It is the Coast Guard's show, and everyone involved is basically following their lead, Kellogg said.

"They have done everything humanly possible," Kellogg said of the Coast Guard's work on the oil spill. Kellogg said he was impressed with the professional manner in which the Coast Guard was handling the spill.

One program Kellogg said he believes has kept the spill under some control is the Regional Response

Team. The RRT is part of state superfund regulations to handle oil spills. The Prince William Sound Contingency Plan, which is part of the RRT, was released only four weeks ago and took two years to complete.

The plan divides the sound into zones and lists the best ways to handle oil in each zone. The plan offers guidelines on dispersants, controlled burning of the oil and using booms to contain the oil.

Arguments over the use of dispersants in the sound were uncontested, said Doug Johnson, an environmental scientist for EPA. Johnson said that the contingency plan gave the Coast Guard the right to use the dispersant in zone one, deep water, as soon as the spill happened.

Environmentalists are concerned that efforts to clean up the oil could be as bad as the oil itself. Many dispersants contain toxins as or more deadly than the oil, and burning puts toxins from the oil into the air.

A coalition of at least 14 environmental groups, including Greenpeace, Trustees for Alaska and the Alaska Center for the Environment, sent a letter to President Bush asking for stronger federal laws within the oil industry. A press conference called by the coalition Wednesday pro-

duced suggestions that ranged from stepping up regulations to closing down the pipeline.

More and more animals in the sound are being found dead, covered with oil. Birds found alive are being taken to a bird cleaning station in Valdez.

There is a great deal of concern over the sea otters in the sound. Studies have shown that the otters lose the ability to withstand the frigid waters of the sound once they are covered with oil. Sea otters are an endangered species and unless a large number are saved, the population may disappear.

While there are a great deal of people concerned about the animals and environment in Valdez, too much of anything can be bad.

"We're sorry, all circuits are busy now. Will you please try your call again later? This is a recording."

That was the news from Valdez as hundreds of callers tried to get through jammed phone lines. Officials handling the oil spill requested that people not come into the already overflowing town and to limit calls to the area.

The jammed circuitry made it difficult for those helping outside Valdez to get information to workers on site. Officials said that those wanting to help with the cleanup should wait until the initial emergency is over.