

What happened on March 24, 1989

Source: Exxon Valdez Restoration Plan



The Oil Spill. Shortly after midnight on March 24, 1989, the T/V Exxon Valdez ran aground on Bligh Reef in Prince William Sound, Alaska, spilling almost eleven million gallons of North Slope Crude oil. It was the largest tanker spill in United States history. That spring the oil moved along the coastline of Alaska, contaminating portions of the shoreline of Prince William Sound, the Kenai Peninsula, lower Cook Inlet, the Kodiak Archipelago, and the Alaska Peninsula. Oiled areas include a National Forest, four National Wildlife Refuges, three National Parks, five State Parks, four State Critical Habitat Areas, and a State Game Sanctuary. Oil eventually reached shorelines nearly 600 miles southwest from Bligh Reef where the spill occurred. The spill area includes all of the shoreline oiled by the spill, severely affected communities, and adjacent uplands to the watershed divide.

Response. During 1989, efforts focused on containing and cleaning up the spill, and rescuing oiled wildlife. Skimmers worked to remove oil from the water. Booms were positioned to keep oil from reaching salmon hatcheries in Prince William Sound and Kodiak. A fleet of private fishing vessels known as the "Mosquito Fleet" played an important role in protecting these hatcheries, assisting the skimmers, and capturing oiled wildlife and transporting them to rehabilitation centers. Exxon began to clean up beaches under the direction of the U.S. Coast Guard with advice from federal and state agencies and local communities. Several thousand workers cleaned shorelines, using techniques ranging from cleaning rocks by hand to high-pressure hot-water washing. Fertilizers were applied to some oiled shorelines to increase the activity of oil-metabolizing microbes, an activity known as bioremediation.

The 1989 shoreline assessment, completed after the summer cleanup ended, showed that a large amount of oil remained on the shorelines. In the spring of 1990, the shoreline was again surveyed in a joint effort by Exxon and the state and federal governments. The survey showed that much work remained to be done. The principal clean-up method used in 1990 was manually removing the remaining oil, but bioremediation and relocation of oiled beach material to the active surf zone were also used in some areas.

Shoreline surveys and limited clean-up work occurred in 1991, 1992, 1993, and 1994. In 1992, crews from Exxon and the state and federal governments visited eighty-one sites in Prince William Sound and the Kenai Peninsula. They reported that an estimated seven miles of the 21.4 miles of shoreline surveyed still showed some surface oiling. This number does not include oiling that may have remained on shorelines set aside for monitoring natural recovery. The surveys also indicated that subsurface oil remained at many sites that were

heavily oiled in 1989. No sites were surveyed on Kodiak Island or the Alaska Peninsula in 1992. Earlier surveys suggested that most of the light oil (scattered tar balls and mousse) which remained on Kodiak Island and the Alaska Peninsula would degrade by 1992. While there may be a few exceptions, the surveys determined that the cost and potential environmental impact of further cleanup was greater than the problems caused by leaving the oil in place. The 1992 cleanup and the 1993 shoreline assessment were concentrated in those areas where oil remained to a greater degree - Prince William Sound and the Kenai Peninsula.

In 1994, Restoration workers performed manual treatment to accelerate degradation of surface oil on approximately a dozen important subsistence and recreating beaches in western Prince William Sound. They also performed manual treatment to accelerate degradation of subsurface oil beneath approximately a dozen oiled mussel beds in protected areas of western Prince William Sound.

Natural Resource Damage Assessment. During the first summer after the spill, one state and three federal government agencies directed the Natural Resource Damage Assessment field studies to determine the nature and extent of the injuries as needed for litigation purposes. The federal agencies were the U.S. Department of the Interior, U.S. Department of Agriculture and the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration. The state agency was the Alaska Department of Fish and Game. Expert peer reviewers provided independent scientific review of ongoing and planned studies and assisted with synthesis of results. Most damage assessment field studies were completed during 1991.