Five Lessons from Alaska’s Exxon Valdez Oil Spill

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Presented at CNREP 2010:
The 3rd National Forum on Socioeconomic Research in Coastal Systems
New Orleans Louisiana
May 27, 2010
The news and images from the Gulf oil spill are a painful reminder for Alaskans of the Exxon Valdez Oil Spill and its aftermath.

Photo source: http://arthurpage.files.wordpress.com/2009/02/exxon_valdez.jpg
We vividly recall . . .

- Feelings of powerlessness as the spill kept spreading
- Feelings of sorrow over filthy oil in a beautiful, pristine environment
- Feelings of frustration, rage, and cynicism over:
  - Broken promises that “it won’t happen” and “we can clean it up”
  - Chaotic response by industry and government
  - Useless (or harmful) “clean-up” activities
  - Economic disruptions
  - Two decades of litigation culminating in disappointment
LESSON 1
The oil spill creates challenges and opportunities for scientists

• Everyone wants immediate answers about complex questions, even though:
  – You have your regular job to do
  – They weren’t willing to fund the baseline research that would have made it possible to answer their questions

• What scientists say suddenly matters a lot
  – There is a lot of money at stake
    • What kinds of impacts the spill will have
    • How long will they last
  – People may attack you and your research if they don’t like your answers
  – Objective scientific analysis and discussion becomes much more difficult

• There will be a lot of funding for research—and competition for funding.

• Who you work for matters
  – People will perceive your research as influenced by who funded you
  – Who you work for could affect your future credibility

• It is more important than ever to be careful and objective!

• Can you find ways to create “neutral” research planning and funding mechanisms?
LESSON 2
Consider the model of the Exxon Valdez Oil Spill Trustee Council

• Can the tragedy of the spill create an opportunity to better understand and care for the Gulf ecosystem?
LESSON 3
Try not to spend lots of money in stupid ways.

• Exxon spent a huge amount of money on “clean-up” efforts that were of minimal value--and maybe harmful--because:
  – They promised they would clean it up
  – They had to look like they were trying
  – Nobody cared about saving money for Exxon
  – A lot of people made a lot of money working on the clean-up

• It would have been better if that money had been spent in more useful ways that brought more long-term benefit.

• Is there a way you can negotiate so that you spend money on what gets you the most benefit over the long term?

Photo source: http://www.adn.com/evos/photos/evos23l.jpg
LESSON 4
Deal with the spill—and then move on.

• Some Alaska communities and individuals can’t seem to move on
• Some blame the spill for everything that has gone wrong since
  – Problems of the salmon industry
• Don’t become permanent victims
LESSON 5
We need to think very hard about whether there are ways we can minimize the perverse incentives of our legal system in how we respond to this kind of crisis.

• A large oil spill cries out for cooperation between oil companies, government, and affected communities
  – In understanding what is happening
  – In minimizing damage
  – In cleaning up
  – In identifying and facilitating appropriate compensation
  – In designing policies that work better
• It’s hard to cooperate when everyone has to position themselves for the coming lawsuits
• It’s hard to see the litigation which followed the Exxon-Valdez spill as anything but a failure of our justice system
  – Expense
  – Delay
  – Uncertainty
• We need fundamental reforms to how we deal legally with environmental disasters.