

# Arctic governments and industry still unprepared for oil spills 20 years after Exxon Valdez

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Two decades after the Exxon Valdez oil spill devastated a vast stretch of the Alaskan coast, governments and industry in the Arctic would be unable to effectively manage a large oil spill, according to a new report by World Wildlife Fund. As the 20th anniversary of the Exxon Valdez spill approaches on March 24, WWF renewed its call for a time-out on new offshore oil development in the Arctic until technologies improve to ensure adequate clean-up of an oil spill. WWF is also calling on the Obama Administration to permanently protect Alaska's fish-rich Bristol Bay from drilling.

The Exxon Valdez oil spill in Prince William Sound, Alaska was one of the world's worst ecological disasters. A WWF report released today demonstrates how the [Arctic](#) remains ill-prepared should another spill occur. The report, "Lessons Not Learned," finds that while practices have improved in Prince William Sound, oil spill response capabilities throughout Arctic region have improved little in the past 20 years.

To mark the Exxon Valdez anniversary, WWF will showcase rocks collected from Prince William Sound beaches that are still coated in oil. Additionally, the House Natural Resources Committee will hold a hearing on Tuesday examining the future of [offshore oil development](#) in U.S. waters.

"While new regulations are in place regarding response to oil spill

disasters in the last 20 years, the Arctic itself has changed considerably and is much more vulnerable today," said Bill Eichbaum, WWF's vice president for marine and arctic policy. "Sea ice is disappearing and open water seasons are lasting longer, creating a frenzy to stake claims on the Arctic's rich resources - especially oil and gas development. [Oil spills](#) can be devastating to Arctic marine environments given the current lack of oil spill response capabilities. We need a 'time-out' until protections are in place for this fragile, extraordinary place."

WWF, which has the world's largest Arctic conservation program, also recommends that the most vulnerable and important areas of the Arctic be deemed permanently off-limits to oil and gas development. Such "no-go zones" should be based on the sensitivity and productivity of special priority areas, where oil spill response would be virtually impossible to clean up or where any spill would cause irreparable long-term damage. These areas include Bristol Bay in the southeastern Bering Sea in Alaska, known as "America's fish basket," where more than 40 percent of all wild seafood is caught in the United States. Oil and gas development in the bay is estimated to bring in \$7.7 billion over the 25-40 year lifetime experts predict it would take to extract the resources. By comparison, the renewable fisheries of the Bristol Bay region are valued at \$50-\$80 billion over that same time period.

"Fishermen's livelihoods are at stake," said Keith Colburn, a Bristol Bay crab fisherman featured on Discovery Channel's *Deadliest Catch*. "Loss of the Bristol Bay fisheries would put thousands of fishermen out of work and break down the engine of a fishery that brings in \$2.2 billion to the economy each year. It's not worth the risk."

WWF is urging Arctic countries to conduct comprehensive risk assessments of industrial activities, such as shipping and petroleum development, along with climate change-induced impacts on the marine environment. In addition, Arctic countries should also adopt a region-

wide comprehensive agreement for spill response and launch conservation plans that assess the health, biodiversity and functioning of Arctic ecosystems.

"The [Exxon Valdez spill](#) has been the best-studied oil spill in history and scientists have found that even 20 years later, the damage from the spill continues," said Margaret Williams, managing director of WWF's Alaska program. "Fishermen's livelihoods were destroyed, many wildlife and fish populations still haven't recovered and the Alaskan economy lost billions of dollars. We can't let that happen again in Alaska's productive waters."

More information: The full report, "Lessons Not Learned: 20 Years after the Exxon Valdez Disaster, Little has Changed in How We Respond to Oil Spills in the Arctic," can be downloaded at [www.worldwildlife.org/what/how...FBinaryitem11907.pdf](http://www.worldwildlife.org/what/how...FBinaryitem11907.pdf)

Source: World Wildlife Fund

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