

# Exxon Valdez Runs Aground in 1989

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In this photo taken April 9, 1989 file photo, a local fisherman inspects a dead California gray whale on the northern shore of Latouche Island, Alaska. The whale was found over the weekend in the oil-contaminated waters of Prince William Sound. Wildlife experts later determined that the whale had died before the Exxon Valdez oil spill occurred on March 24. Nearly 25 years after the Exxon Valdez oil spill off the coast of Alaska, some damage heals, some effects linger in Prince William Sound. (AP Photo/John Gaps III, File)

Early on March 24, 1989, Dean Fosdick, the Alaska bureau chief of The Associated Press, was awakened around 5:30 a.m. by a phone call. The

caller had a tip that a tanker had run aground outside Valdez.

Fosdick quickly confirmed with a top Coast Guard official that the Exxon Valdez had struck a reef and was leaking thick, toxic crude oil into Prince William Sound, and sent out first word to the world of what at the time was the nation's worst-ever oil spill.

The AP dispatched more than a dozen reporters, photographers and editors to cover the disaster. For a generation of people, the stories and the images of fouled coastline, of sea otters, herring and birds soaked in oil, of workers painstakingly washing crude off the rugged shoreline, became seared in their memories.

Twenty five years after their original publication, the AP is making this report, by Susan Gallagher, and images, taken by Jack Smith and John Gaps III:

## **GROUNDED TANKER SPILLS 270,000 BARRELS OF OIL OFF ALASKA**

A tanker ran aground on a reef and ripped holes in its hull Friday, gushing millions of gallons of thick crude oil into pristine Prince William Sound in the largest spill in U.S. history.

The Exxon Valdez, a 987-foot (300-meter) tanker owned by Exxon Shipping Co. Inc., struck Bligh Reef about 25 miles (40 kilometers) from Valdez, the northernmost ice-free port in the United States, spilling an estimated 270,000 barrels or 11.3 million gallons (43 million liters) of oil into the Pacific Ocean, the Coast Guard said.

Early Friday the tanker was losing 20,000 gallons (75,700 million liters) of oil per hour, but the outflow slowed to a trickle later Friday. An oil slick snaked about five miles from the ship as wind and tide pushed the

[crude oil](#) into the sound and away from shore.

"This is the largest oil spill in U.S. history and it unfortunately took place in an enclosed water body with numerous islands, channels, bays and fiords," said Richard Golob, publisher of the Golob Oil Pollution Bulletin.



In this April 17, 1989, file photo, a worker makes his way across the polluted shore of Block Island, Alaska, as efforts are underway to test techniques to clean up the oil spill of the tanker Exxon Valdez in Prince William Sound. The worker periodically uses the bucket to scoop up oil washing back onto shore from the containment booms. Nearly 25 years after the Exxon Valdez oil spill off the coast of Alaska, some damage heals, some effects linger in Prince William Sound. (AP Photo/John Gaps III, File)

The Alaska Department of Environmental Conservation said three tanks

on the ship's right side and five tanks along the centerline were punctured. The tanks on the left side appeared intact, the agency said.

Exxon was bringing in three planeloads of cleanup crews from around the world.

"A spill of this size in such a complex environment promises to be a cleanup nightmare," said Golob, a Cambridge, Massachusetts-based consultant whose firm has studied [oil spills](#) and environmental disasters for 15 years.

"There's no way for the oil to go out to sea without passing through narrow channels," he said by telephone from Cambridge. "As a result a large shoreline area will most likely be polluted and undoubtedly the cleanup will be very extensive and labor intensive."

In Washington, Interior Department spokesman Steve Goldstein said efforts had begun to evacuate waterfowl, sea otters and other wildlife from the danger area. "Obviously some of the waterfowl have already died," he said.



In this April 1989 file photo, an oil soaked bird is examined on an island in Prince William Sound, Alaska. Exxon Mobil Corp. was ordered Monday, June 15, 2009 to pay about \$500 million in interest on punitive damages for the Exxon Valdez oil spill off Alaska, nearly doubling the payout to Alaska Natives, fishermen, business owners and others harmed by the 1989 disaster. The ruling was issued by the 9th U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals in San Francisco. Nearly 25 years after the Exxon Valdez oil spill off the coast of Alaska, some damage heals, some effects linger in Prince William Sound. (AP Photo/Jack Smith, File)

The vessel had loaded 1.26 million barrels of oil at the Alyeska Pipeline Service Co. marine terminal at Valdez and left late Thursday for Long Beach, California.

The terminal was closed to tanker traffic early Friday while officials tried to deal with the spill. The Federal Aviation Administration closed airspace for six miles around the tanker to keep sightseers at bay.

Officials cut the flow in the trans-Alaska oil pipeline to 800,000 barrels daily from 1.2 million barrels, which would let the terminal operate for nine days before the line has to shut down, said Alyeska spokesman Tom Brennan.

Coast Guard Petty Officer John Gonzales said the tanker's captain was experienced and may have been maneuvering to avoid icebergs from Columbia Glacier when the vessel ran aground. Two Coast Guard investigators went aboard the tanker, he said.

"The rock they hit is definitely not in tanker lanes," said Coast Guard Lt. Greg Stewart in Juneau. He said the reef is about 1 1/2 miles (two kilometers) outside normal lanes.

Gonzales said employees of the Alyeska Pipeline Service Co., which operates the trans-Alaska oil pipeline for a consortium of oil companies, were working to contain the oil with floating booms.

Don Cornett, Alaska coordinator for Exxon USA, said about two dozen people were aboard the Exxon Valdez. There were no immediate reports of injuries.

Gov. Steve Cowper arrived in Valdez on Friday to evaluate the spill. He said state officials were considering the use of chemicals to disperse and sink the oil.

"The problem is that chemical use can have a bad effect on marine life," he said. "It's going to be a tough judgment call."



In this April 4, 1989, file photo, the grounded tanker Exxon Valdez, left, unloads oil onto a smaller tanker, San Francisco, as efforts to re-float the ship continue on Prince William Sound, 25 miles from Valdez, Alaska. The 987-foot tanker, carrying 53 million gallons of crude, struck Bligh Reef at 12:04 a.m. on March 24, 1989, and within hours unleashed an estimated 10.8 million gallons of thick, toxic crude oil into the water. Storms and currents then smeared it over 1,300 miles of shoreline. Twenty five years later, the region, its people and its wildlife are still recovering. (AP Photo, File)

Cowper said conventional responses, such as booms, probably would not work because the spill is so large. "You probably couldn't do it (contain the spill) with all the equipment available in North America. This is a major spill by any reckoning.

"We've been able to brag for a long time that there's never been a major oil spill in Valdez Harbor. Now, we can't do that anymore."

The Alaska Department of Fish and Game called an emergency meeting to discuss the potential effect on marine mammals and birds in the sound.

In addition to the terminal, the picturesque community of about 3,000 year-round residents about 125 miles (200 million kilometers) east of Anchorage relies on the fishing and tourism industries. The sound is a playground for kayakers, sport fishermen and tourists.



In this April 2, 1989, file photo, workers try to remove globs of oil from Baked Island in Prince William Sound, Alaska. A massive oil slick covers Prince William Sound stretching over 100 miles as the result of the tanker Exxon Valdez running aground March 24, 1989, spilling more than 10-million gallons of oil. Nearly 25 years after the Exxon Valdez oil spill off the coast of Alaska, some damage heals, some effects linger in Prince William Sound. (AP Photo/Jack Smith, File)



Exxon's Cornett said his company was bringing three planeloads of oil spill response workers from all over the world to deal with the mess. He said the company hoped to pump the oil remaining aboard the grounded vessel onto another ship, refloat the Exxon Valdez and clean up the oil.

"I haven't the foggiest idea what it will cost," he said. "It won't be cheap."



In this April 16, 1989, file photo, a clean-up worker rakes through crude oil, contained by floating booms off the waters of Prince William Sound, Alaska. The oil, contained here in Snug Harbor off Knight Island, was later sucked off the water by a U.S. Coast Guard skimmer. Oil from the tanker Exxon Valdez continues to foul the waters of southern Alaska. Nearly 25 years after the Exxon

Valdez oil spill off the coast of Alaska, some damage heals, some effects linger in Prince William Sound. (AP Photo/John Gaps III, File)

Jason Wells, executive director of the Valdez Fisheries Development Association, said he believed the oil slick would cause little damage unless wind pushes it back toward Valdez. The fishing industry is between seasons.

Wells said the black cod fishery is scheduled to begin April 1, but the region's major herring fishery is not expected to get under way until mid-April.

But the spill likely will draw increasing fire from environmentalists sensitive about the trans-Alaska pipeline and efforts to open the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge to oil development.

"It's of concern for two reasons: one is the size of the spill and that this is such a sensitive, very productive area," said Lisa Speer, senior staff scientist with the Natural Resources Defense Council in New York.



In this April 21, 1989, file photo, a skimmer is used for shoreline oil in Naked Island, Alaska. It collects the oil from off the water surface. The conveyor belt moves the oil onto a barge for storage. Nearly 25 years after the Exxon Valdez oil spill off the coast of Alaska, some damage heals, some effects linger in Prince William Sound. (AP Photo/Rob Stapleton, File)

"This is a consequence of North Slope oil development that is rarely mentioned," she said.

Valdez City Manager Doug Griffin said the 800-mile (1,300 kilometer) trans-Alaska pipeline which carries oil from Prudhoe Bay to Valdez and the marine terminal have an enviable environmental record. "But this could be a catastrophic occurrence, so we're concerned," he said.

"Living in Valdez, we've always worried that sometime something like this could happen," he said.



In this April 18, 1989 file photo, a rescued sea otter is restrained and washed by workers at a local animal facility after five of the oil covered mammals were captured in the fouled waters of Prince William Sound, Alaska. The list of animals injured and killed from the spill of the oil tanker Exxon Valdez includes sea otters, deer, eagles, owls and a host of other water fowl gathered up by rescue workers. Nearly 25 years after the Exxon Valdez oil spill off the coast of Alaska, some damage heals, some effects linger in Prince William Sound. (AP Photo/John Gaps III, File)

Previously, the largest tanker spill was the Dec. 15, 1976, grounding of the Argo Merchant tanker off the Nantucket shoals, in which 7.6 million gallons (29 million liters) of oil spilled, Golob said.

The largest tanker spill in history was in the July 19, 1979, collision off Tobago of the supertankers Atlantic Empress and Aegean Captain, in which 300,000 tons - more than 80 million gallons (300 million liters) -

of [oil](#) was lost.

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