

Exxon Valdez oil spill, 25 years later

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In the early morning hours of March 24, 1989, the Exxon Valdez oil tanker sliced into Prince William Sound's Bligh Reef, spilling hundreds of thousands of barrels of crude oil into pristine Alaskan waters. It is considered one of the most devastating human-caused environmental disasters.

Twenty-five years later, impacts from the spill remain. Liesel Ritchie, assistant director of CU-Boulder's Natural Hazards Center, spent years researching the impact the spill has had on the residents of Cordova, considered ground zero for the spill.

"The herring population still has yet to recover in Prince William Sound," Ritchie said. "There has not been a viable herring fishery since the mid-1990s. And that's one of the unpleasant reminders of the oil spill. You can't tell anybody who lives in Cordova or anywhere else in Prince William Sound that that's not somehow related to the oil spill."

Ritchie was part of a collaborative 24-year longitudinal study of Cordova. In addition to the economic impacts on the people in the region, the oil spill caused serious community conflict and [mental health issues](#).

"What has fostered so much stress and anxiety in the community as a whole is different science says different things," she said. "For example, Exxon scientists say everything is fine, that the impacts were minimal to begin with and that they subsided very quickly. Then other scientists who are not being paid by Exxon have other findings. What we're talking about here at that level then is contested science which tends to cause uncertainty and stress in populations that are receiving this information and not knowing entirely how to interpret that."

And Ritchie says another factor making matters even more stressful for people affected by the spill was the protracted claims process and litigation that finally ended in a judgment against Exxon in 2008.

"One of the things that our research found over the years after the Exxon Valdez was that after, around 1996 or so, the major source of stress associated with the Exxon Valdez oil spill was not the spill itself but the litigation associated with that, which is the only way in our current system that individuals can receive compensation to the degree that they need to," she said.

Though it was finally settled, it was much less than what many people in Cordova and the surrounding region expected. What was once a \$5

billion judgment in 1995 was reduced, through appeal to the U.S. Supreme Court, to \$507 million.

"The way most people describe it was a slap in the face because although they won the judgment against Exxon, the punitive damages were just that, puny, in most of the people's minds in Cordova," Ritchie said. "And there were some people that were really hopeful. And those people were the hardest hit in terms of the frustration and to an extent the anger that they felt with the Supreme Court and the way things went down."

Even with a smaller than expected settlement Ritchie says the people of Cordova appear to be moving on and doing their best to revive their fishing economy. However, she says, they have a long way to go. Before the spill Cordova consistently ranked in the top 10 most profitable U.S. seafood ports. A quarter century later, it's not even in the top 25.

"You know, I think one of the most important things that I would like to share that I've learned over the years in working with people in Cordova, Alaska, in particular, is how strong and truly resilient they are," she said. "I'm happy to say that at this point we have turned a corner on the stress associated with the spill and the ongoing litigation. The most recent data collection this past year suggests that the level of stress has dropped in the community as a whole, which is the first time since 1989 that we've seen that happen."

Provided by University of Colorado at Boulder

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