

## EXXON VALDEZ OIL SPILL (1989)

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Exxon Valdez was the original of an oil tanker owned by the former Exxon Shipping Company, a division of the former Exxon Corporation. It gained widespread infamy after the March 24, 1989 oil spill in which the tanker, captained by Joseph Hazelwood and bound for Long Beach, California, hit Prince William Sound's Bligh Reef and spilled an estimated minimum 10.8 million US gallons (40.9 million liters) of crude oil. The first cleanup response was through the use of a dispersant, a surfactant and solvent mixture. Because there was not enough wave action to mix the dispersant with the oil in the water, the use of the dispersant was discontinued. The test was relatively successful, reducing 113,400 litres of oil to 1,134 litres of removable residue, but because of unfavorable weather no additional burning was attempted. Mechanical cleanup was started shortly afterwards using booms and skimmers. This has been recorded as one of the largest spills in U.S. history and one of the largest ecological disasters. The damage to the fishing industry and to native subsistence hunting lasted for years. Exxon originally was ordered by a federal court to pay \$5 billion in punitive damages in 1994. On June 25, 2008, the United States Supreme Court further reduced the damages to just over \$500 million. Following the oil and its impacts over the past 20 years has changed our understanding of the long-term damage from an oil spill. Because of the scope and duration of the restoration program, lingering oil and its effects were discovered and tracked. As a result, we know that risk assessment for future spills must consider what the total damages will be over a longer period of time, rather than only the acute damages in the days and weeks following a spill. Beaches in the Gulf of Alaska are unique because of their composition and structure, and the lack of waves and winter storm action. This, along with the colder temperatures, is partly why oil has persisted and remained toxic here. The potential for long-term damage remains wherever oil persists after an oil spill, whether it is buried in the ocean bottom, marshes, mangroves, or other habitats that are not dynamic. In 2009, Exxon Valdez Captain Joseph Hazelwood somewhat belatedly offered a "heartfelt apology" to the people of Alaska, suggesting he had been wrongly blamed for the disaster: "The true story is out there for anybody who wants to look at the facts, but that's not the sexy story and that's not the easy story," he said. Yet Hazelwood said he felt Alaskans always gave him a fair shake.

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