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Gulf oil spill: Lessons from Alaska

Tensions have built, frustrations have swelled and national news cameras have focused on the Gulf Coast since the Deepwater Horizon began belching oil into the Gulf on April 20.

With every passing day, questions go unanswered, the oil well goes uncapped, and the future becomes more uncertain for families and fishermen whose livelihoods depend on the Gulf.

But for a fisherman watching from more than 3,000 miles away, the story seems all too familiar.

Speaking on a cell phone from his fishing boat in Cordova, Alaska, John Platt, 49, said with every TV newscast, the spill sounds more like what happened off his own coast 21 years ago.

"It's a total replay. I've heard BP say, 'Tell us your legitimate claim and we'll make it right,' " Platt said. "It's almost exactly what Exxon said to us."

In 1989, the Exxon Valdez ran aground, dumping 11 million gallons of crude oil into Prince William Sound.

The spill blackened 1,500 miles of Alaska coastline, shut down fisheries, devastated wildlife and threw the residents of Cordova into an economic and psychological turmoil that lingers, in many ways, to this day.

Chief among the chill-inducing similarities mentioned by Cordova residents are the official statements released by BP in the days after the spill.

"Watching BP's executives, it's like listening to (former Exxon CEO) Lee Raymond come up here 20 years ago," said RJ Kopchak, 62, of Cordova. "These handsome, square-jawed, mid-life folks step to the microphone and tell you everything's going to be fine. ... It's hard to beat those guys."

Kopchak said there are differences between the Valdez and the Deepwater Horizon spill, but he said the underlying themes that plagued Cordova residents for decades already are surfacing on the Gulf Coast.

"It will all unfold on a different time line because of the nature of the spill, but all of the benchmark problems are going to be the same," he said.

The parallels

Cordova is about 45 miles southeast of the Valdez spill site, but the oil never reached the town's shores. Strong winds in the days after the spill pushed the slick to the west, smearing it across miles of mountainous coastline despite containment efforts.

As on the Gulf Coast, Cordova received an injection of money immediately after the Valdez spill. Exxon hired fishermen and boat owners who were put out of work by the oil spill to assist in cleanup.

But the money was doled out unevenly. One boat owner might be hired to do cleanup at a rate of thousands

of dollars a day, while his out-of-work neighbor would get nothing.

"When fisheries were closed, the only work for fishermen was to work for Exxon. But some of them couldn't bring themselves to do it," said Stan Jones, spokesman for the Prince William Sound Regional Citizens' Advisory Council. "Invariably, there were resentments against those people who didn't want to work for Exxon and those who did."

Cordova residents came up with a name for people who profited from the Valdez: "Spillionaires."

In the first years after the spill, Exxon paid fishermen the value of their past year's catch to make up for closed fisheries. But as cleanup efforts concluded, the influx of money started to fade. Along with it went Exxon's "We will make you whole," mentality, residents say.

"With Exxon, after the oil spill they acted commendably for about a year or so," Platt said. "But after a year or so, it seemed like they used their resources to distance themselves from their liability rather than making it right. Once it wasn't quite as newsworthy "i boy, they started playing hardball."

The problem was made worse because just as Exxon was pulling out, the long-term effects of the spill were just coming to light.

Fishing industry collapses

Three years after the Valdez spill, the herring fishery in Prince William Sound collapsed. It was one of the area's most valuable resources.

Within a few years of the spill, Exxon settled lawsuits with the state and federal government, but a third lawsuit, which initially awarded \$5 billion in damages to people and businesses affected by the spill, was fiercely contested by Exxon lawyers.

For the next 20 years, Exxon appealed the lawsuit all the way to the Supreme Court. When the case was finally decided in 2009, Exxon had whittled down the judgment to just more than \$500 million.

As the lawsuits were being fought out in federal court, tensions in Cordova turned inward.

J. Steven Picou, a sociology professor at the University of South Alabama in Mobile, has spent 20 years studying the effects of the Exxon Valdez spill on Alaskan communities.

"Over time in Cordova, we found that there was no recovery. People lamented their stress. There were breakdowns in social relationships in town," Picou said.

"It's kind of like Vietnam War veterans. It becomes part of their lives."

Speaking from her home in Cordova, Platt's wife, Rhonda, was unable to mask the emotion from Valdez memories that resurfaced after the Gulf spill.

"People have died, committed suicide, divorced. I'll tell you, it's a miracle of God that me and my husband are still married after all this," she said.

Picou said that during his research he has found that natural disasters, like hurricanes, tend to pull recovering communities together. But man-made disasters can tear them apart.

"We couldn't do anything about (Hurricane) Ivan," Picou said. "People quit blaming God after a couple weeks, and they come back with energy and capital to rebuild.

"But this (spill) should not have happened. Because of that, there is a principal responsible party, and they get blamed. And with blame comes anger. ... You start having concerns due to economic spirals. Before you know it, you're drinking too much and you're suffering from depression."

Happening here

The week after the Deepwater Horizon spill, Escambia and Santa Rosa county officials said they've seen similar frustrations stewing in local communities.

"In public meetings last week, I saw that firsthand," said Gordon Goodin, chairman of the Santa Rosa County Commission.

"You can see the look on their faces. They've been beat down by hurricanes Ivan and Dennis. They feel like this is the summer they were going to come back, but you can see it. They're emotionally wrecked."

Contractors from other areas parachuting into Florida to perform spill recovery work have spawned the Gulf Coast's own version of "spillionaire" resentments.

A framed satellite photo of Hurricane Ivan hangs on the wall in Miles McLean's marina on Bayou Chico.

"Ivan blew in and blew out. We knew what we had to do," McLean said. "But this one. We don't know when it's going to end."

In the past three weeks, McLean and his family watched their business screech to a halt. BP has promised fair compensation for their loss, but McLean is frustrated when he sees that most of the recovery work is being done by people who have little to lose from the spill.

"My biggest complaint: They're not working local people," McLean said. "All of the people who are here working are from Chicago, New York, California. In the meantime, we've got three captains sitting here with nothing to do."

McLean said that in the first two weeks of May, revenues on the boat-towing side of his business alone are down more than 80 percent, about \$16,000, from last year.

McLean pointed to a Vessel of Opportunity contract sitting on the table in front of him.

"This is supposed to give you a ray of hope, but the only hope I have right now is that (attorney Fred) Levin will be able to reach out and touch these people," he said.

Waiting and hoping

The hope that legal action will make things right was mirrored by fishermen in Cordova. But it's a hope that for 20 years remained just out of reach.

Platt said that when he finally got his payment from the Exxon Valdez lawsuit, it barely covered what he paid for his now-worthless commercial herring fishing permit decades ago.

"I waited 20–some years for the end of all this. The whole time it was uncertainty. But I expected the worst and hoped for the best," he said. "But I kind of think now that I hoped for the best a little too much. It didn't really happen."

Picou, who has spent his entire career studying disasters, is quick to point out that much remains uncertain about what the Deepwater Horizon spill's effects will be on the Gulf.

But every passing day makes one thing more certain, Picou said.

"This is a marathon. The gun has just gone off," he said. "Unless we have a miracle, this is just the second step in the race."

About the writer

Pensacola News Journal reporter Travis Griggs first traveled to Cordova, Alaska, in 1997, and has since spent several summers fishing and hiking in wilderness areas near the city. In 2005, Griggs worked a summer job as a fly–fishing guide for outdoorsmen vacationing to Cordova from the Lower 48.

"It's an incredibly wild and untamed area," Griggs said. "Salmon fishing in the glacial rivers there is probably the best in the world. Bears and moose frequently sneak up on you, wading through the same rivers you're fishing. Bald eagles Are everywhere. Hundreds of them. Small float planes frequently buzz overhead, taking supplies to the adventurous souls living God knows where in the backcountry. The only way in or out of the city is by airplane or ferry. A 50–mile gravel road out of town that was initially planned to connect to the Alaska Highway, ends abruptly at a collapsed 'million dollar' bridge, that fell into the Copper River during an earthquake in the 1960s."