

Citizens Come Together to Apply Lessons of Exxon Valdez Oil Spill

PRESS ADVISORY
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Twenty years after the *Exxon Valdez*, Alaska citizens are getting together to take proactive measures to ensure that *never again* will such a disaster take place.

Alaskan Citizens will be coming together **March 10-11, 2009 at the Valdez Convention and Civic Center** in a workshop convened to examine the benefits of citizens' oversight of the Trans-Alaska Pipeline (TAPS). The workshop will involve tribal council, fishing, tourism, and environmental stakeholders in a consensus-building exercise to identify continuing concerns with the TAPS, and action items to address those concerns.

The workshop is being organized by Copper River Watershed Project (CRWP) and Cascadia Wildlands Project, two regional non-profit organizations. "We learned so much about the value of preventive measures from the *Exxon Valdez* spill. And to prepare for the worst-case scenario, we need to develop local response capacity –just as Alyeska did with fishermen in Prince William Sound -- for the remote, difficult-to-access parts of our watershed," says Kristin Smith, director of the CRWP.

The 30-year-old, 800-mile pipeline threatens several critical waterways, including the Copper, Yukon, Tanana, Delta and Gulkana Rivers. TAPS criss-crosses 180 of the Copper River drainage, the most seismically active region along the pipeline route. Recent studies by Alyeska found that a section of buried pipeline near the Gulkana River, a designated Wild and Scenic River and important sockeye salmon habitat, had just 53% of wall thickness remaining. Leak detection systems are woefully inadequate, especially for slow leaks caused by corrosion. Spills into the region's fast flowing, glacial rivers would likely pass designated containment sites hours before clean-up crews could reach the site (CRWP, 2006).

After the 1989 spill, with the eyes of the world on Prince William Sound, the U.S. Congress wrote, "many believe that complacency on the part of industry and government...was one of the contributing factors to the *Exxon Valdez* oil spill. One way to combat this complacency is to involve local citizens in the process..." (Oil Pollution Act of 1990). Doing just that, OPA 1990 created the Prince William Sound and Cook Inlet Regional Citizens' Advisory Councils. These organizations have performed admirably. Their expert staff and citizen directors win high praise from citizens, government, and industry. They are responsible for protective measures that have prevented spills and greatly improved response preparation for oil spills at the Valdez Marine Terminal and in Prince William Sound.

"The TAPS is a dire threat to our way of life here," said Gabe Scott, Alaska representative for Cascadia Wildlands Project in Cordova. "Leaky valves, corrosion, unstable permafrost, flooding, inadequate leak detection, automation, lax oversight, and totally inadequate contingency plans are just some of the problems citizens are noticing. People got complacent last time around. We aren't going to let that happen again."

Tuesday, March 10th, 2009 5:30-7:30 p.m.: Community Forum on the Trans-Alaska Pipeline

The purpose of this forum will be to gather the best, current understanding of TAPS issues. Speaker presentations will be made by Richard Fineberg, Gabe Scott, Cascadia Wildlands Project, and Prince William Sound Regional Citizens' Advisory Council.

Wednesday, March 11th, 2009 9 a.m. – 4 p.m.: Building a Foundation for Citizen Oversight

Peter VanTuyn, attorney with Bessenyey & VanTuyn, will be on hand to review legal framework for potential citizens oversight efforts. Wednesday's workshop activities will be designed to:

- Identify stakeholder concerns regarding TAPS;
- Identify consensus actions to address specific concerns; and
- Develop an action plan of next steps, including development of work groups for pushing forward certain tasks.

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