

Statement of Jack Lamb  
Before the  
House Interior and Insular Affairs Committee  
Subcommittee on Water, Power and Offshore Energy Resources  
May 7, 1989

Mr. Chairman and Members of the Committee, my name is Jack Lamb and I'm Vice President of the Cordova District Fishermen United. I own and operate a 66 foot fish tender. I've been involved with the Cordova fishing community since 1972.

As you know well by now, the Exxon Valdez went aground on Bligh Reef in Prince William Sound just after midnight on Friday, March 24. I'll certainly never forget hearing the news at 7:00 a.m. that morning. Yet by 10:00 a.m., with the help of both seiners and gillnetters, we had at least 30 vessels ready to do whatever it took to help fight the spill.

It was very frustrating that day, trying to contact Alyeska in Valdez to offer our help. Call after call went unanswered. About 3:00 p.m., Gary Kumkopff in the Village of Tatitlek called to tell me that they had 15 vessels that could be used. They too had attempted without success to get through to Alyeska.

Late into the evening, CDFU's executive director Marilyn Leland and I continued to work to enlist available vessels and people who were willing to help. It became clear that the fishermen needed to

be involved on the scene in Valdez, so I flew over to join Dr. Riki Ott and Rick Steiner on Saturday morning.

It's still very hard to imagine the nightmare I saw on the flight to Valdez. Day 2 of the spill, more than 34 hours after the tanker went aground, there was only a small line of oil spill boom, hanging in a straight line downstream from the crippled tanker. The sound was calm, the weather good, but there was no attempt whatsoever to surround the oil.

At a press conference Saturday afternoon, Alyeska had very little to say. They kept insisting that boom was deployed and that the vessel was surrounded by boom. I pointedly disagreed.

I remember asking Captain Steve McCall how a tanker with sophisticated navigation equipment could have strayed so far from the designated tanker lanes to run smack into Bligh Reef. At that time, Captain McCall had no answer for me. I hope that we will know more after this hearing.

On Sunday, Day 3 of the spill, I went to the Salmon Gulch Hatchery which is run by the Valdez Fisheries Development Association. I noticed on the way back that the winds from the north were increasing dramatically.

At a press conference Sunday evening, the focus was on Exxon's use of dispersants. Their efforts didn't exactly inspire confidence.

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One test got very little dispersant on the spill, but did do a good job of drenching the tanker and the personnel that were on board.

It's important to keep in mind that we are fishermen, not oil spill experts. We were trying to learn a lot in a very short time. Try as we might, however, we could not figure out how Exxon could control an oil spill that big with so little available dispersant. We worked with the Department of Fish and Game to be sure we were consulted and that dispersants were not sprayed indiscriminately.

Because of the high winds, by Monday, Day 4 the spill had spread out like wildfire. The Department of Environmental Conservation told us that the slick was heading west toward Eleanor and Naked Island. That evening, we started making the difficult decisions about which sensitive areas of the sound should be protected first. We chose hatcheries, including the Armin Koernig Hatchery at Sawmill Bay and Eshamy Lagoon, to be protected at all costs against the onslaught of crude.

Monday evening, what came to be known as the operations committee was formed. This consisted initially of representatives from Exxon, the Coast Guard, the State, and the Cordova District Fishermen United. I served on this committee, which was set up to try to coordinate the cleanup and recovery of the spill and to deal with the wrecked tanker. Exxon was concerned that the tanker could break up and spill even more oil in the water.

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We deployed fishing vessels out of Cordova by 10:00 p.m. that evening and throughout the next day. The fishermen did not have contracts to be paid, or even a firm idea of exactly what they would do. They wanted to help, because Prince William Sound is the most special place in the world to us.

With about two hours of sleep, I went in a helicopter to fly over the spill on Tuesday morning, Day 5 of the spill. I was shocked at what I saw. The massive oil slick extended down as far as Herring Bay on Knight Island. Between Point Eleanor and Lone Island it was pitch black and looked thick enough to walk on.

Although the fishermen stood ready, it was rapidly apparent that Exxon had no concept of how to contain this oil spill. The availability of equipment seemed non-existent. A pattern began to emerge through the next few days as we were consistently told by Exxon that skimmers, boom and other materials "were on the way." I could not figure out where the stuff was going, because whenever we needed it in the critical, early days, Exxon didn't deliver.

It became clear to me that Exxon was not making any serious effort to deal with recovering the oil. The Coast Guard Cutter Bittersweet's skimming operation appeared to be working. But even that was like running your finger through oil, compared to what needed to be done.

Since Exxon's effort at actual recovery of oil was pathetic , the very best fishermen could do was to try to keep oil out of the key hatcheries. We had to combine hard work with a lot of ingenuity. For example, late one night, we were trying to figure out some way to recover oil using pumps like those used on fish tenders. It turns out that there is a huge vacuum cleaner type device called a "supersucker" used Prudhoe Bay. With DEC's help, we had it driven down the Haul Road and put on a barge. With fishermen using purse seining techniques to gather oil, and the help of the "supersucker," we were able to defend Sawmill Bay.

The best summary of the early days is in a statement by Frank Iarossi of Exxon. He said that Exxon did everything the fishermen and Jack Lamb asked them to do. The real problem is that is all they did. We are fishermen, not oil spill recovery experts. Exxon never took the initiative in the crisis. They kept saying that they were bringing in more skimmers and more boom, but every time we needed to get a specific job done, we ran into a foot dragging effort.

Looking back, the biggest question I have concerns Alyeska's responsibility for the oil spread across hundreds of miles of Alaska coastline. It is Alyeska's contingency plan that failed miserably. Alyeska is the entity that we have to live with in the future, long after Exxon has gone back to Houston. Alyeska has conveniently been out of sight, as the news media focuses national attention on Exxon's many shortcomings.

It's high time that Alyeska and its oil company owners begin to accept total responsibility for what they have done to Prince William Sound, to the fish and wildlife, to Alaskans, and to the people of this nation.

That concludes my prepared statement. I will be happy to answer any specific questions.