

25 years after the spill, Cook Inlet has changed significantly

This past month, Alaskans marked the anniversaries of not one, but two life-altering experiences: the 1964 earthquake and the *Exxon Valdez* oil spill—both of which happened on Good Friday, 25 years apart. While the focus of the 25th Anniversary of the *Exxon Valdez* has been fixed on Prince William Sound, it's important to remember that Cook Inlet and other areas were also changed significantly because of the spill.

Changes have been particularly great in oil spill prevention and response. OPA 90 and state law require strict regulations and standards for response planning and tankers operating in the inlet. Certified oil spill removal organizations (OSROs) are in place, capable of providing oil spill planning and response services to Cook Inlet's facilities and vessels throughout the region, including a fishing vessel response fleet that shares many of the same local fleet with our neighbors in Prince William Sound. Cook Inlet's oil spill response community and partners have developed and are using better equipment to recover and contain more oil and protect more beaches. Cook Inlet's oil spill prevention and response plans are improved and Cook Inlet's operators must prove their effectiveness through drills and exercises.

Citing complacency on the part of industry and government as a contributing factor leading up to the spill, the Oil Pollution Act of 1990 (OPA 90) created a system of regulation and oversight modeled after a mechanism existing in the Shetland Islands at Sullom Voe, at the time considered the safest terminal in Europe. This mechanism involved local citizens in the process of preparing, adopting and revising oil spill contingency plans and fostering long-term partnerships with industry, government and local communities in overseeing environmental compliance in crude oil industry operations. From OPA 90, this mechanism became the Regional Citizens' Advisory Councils (RCAC), one for Prince William Sound and another for Cook Inlet. We are the only two such councils in the United States that have been created by an Act of Congress.

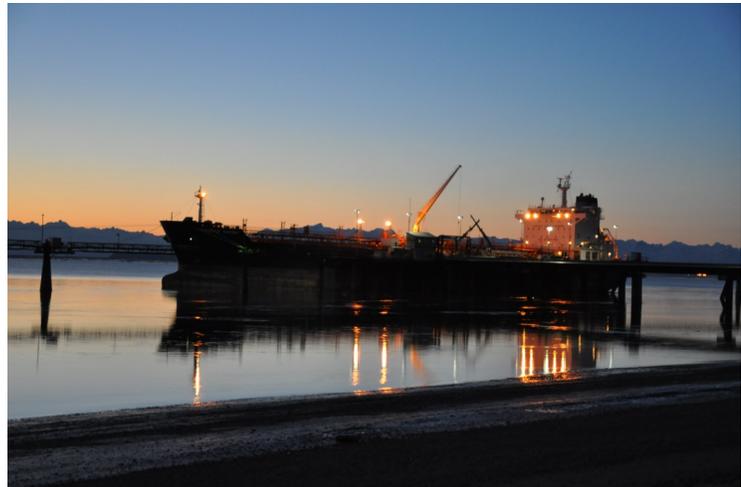


Photo by Susan Sauppe

Because of the RCACs, citizens have been involved in all aspects of oil spill prevention and response, and have helped insure the protections built into state and federal laws continue to be met. Citizens are playing a key role in oil spill prevention and contingency plan review, technical reviews, scientific studies, risk assessments, monitoring and oversight. Since our incorporation in 1990, Cook Inlet RCAC has been instrumental in effecting change. We were influential in securing a dedicated docking assist and rescue tug in Nikiski. We created and continue to expand an ice camera network to aid mariners transiting Cook Inlet's treacherous, winter ice conditions. With the Alaska Department of Environmental Conservation and the U.S. Coast Guard, we are nearing completion of Cook Inlet's first ever comprehensive navigation risk assessment. Through our physical oceanographic observations and modeling studies we are gaining a better understanding of how oil might move through the inlet. We have compiled and share Cook Inlet's largest database of hydrocarbon contaminants to help identify natural and either man-made or oil industry sources of hydrocarbons. With our partners, we have mapped the entire Cook Inlet shoreline and identified important habitat and risks to aid in oil spill response. We have developed a powerful tool to consolidate and access information important to decision makers for protecting our shorelines, waters and habitat. (*Continued.*)

Certainly, we have come a long way since those terrible days in 1989. OPA 90 created RCACs to involve citizens and build partnerships. Because of this, we have worked together and accomplished more in the past 25 years than many ever thought possible. But there's more work to do. It is hard to believe that next year Cook Inlet RCAC will celebrate our own 25th anniversary. No doubt, we will focus on the progress we've made thus far, but we are also looking ahead at what we can still do together to make Cook Inlet one of the safest waterways to do business, to work, and for recreation.