

BP Responsible For Exxon Valdez Disaster, Too

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Since a busted oil well began spewing crude into the Gulf of Mexico a month ago, the catastrophe has constantly been measured against the 1989 Exxon Valdez disaster. The Alaska spill leaked nearly 11 million gallons of crude, killed countless wildlife and tarnished the owner of the damaged tanker, Exxon.

Yet the leader of botched containment efforts in the critical hours after the tanker ran aground wasn't Exxon Mobil Corp. It was BP PLC, the same firm now fighting to plug the Gulf leak.

BP owned a controlling interest in the Alaska oil industry consortium that was required to write a cleanup plan and respond to the spill two decades ago. It also supplied the top executive of the consortium, Alyeska Pipeline Service Co. Lawsuits and investigations that followed the Valdez disaster blamed both Exxon and Alyeska for a response that was bungled on many levels.

People who had a front row seat to the Alaska spill tell The Associated Press that BP's actions in the Gulf suggest it hasn't changed much at all.

The Gulf leak has grown to at least 6 million gallons since an oil rig exploded April 20, killing 11, and is almost certain to overtake Valdez as the nation's worst oil spill.

Watching the current crisis is like reliving the Valdez disaster for an attorney who headed the legal team for the state-appointed Alaska Oil Spill Commission that investigated the 1989 spill.

"I feel this horrible, sickening feeling," said Zygmunt Plater, who now teaches law at Boston College.

The Alaska spill occurred just after midnight on March 24, 1989, when the Exxon Valdez tanker carrying more than 50 million gallons of crude hit a reef after deviating from shipping lanes at the Valdez oil terminal. Years of cost cutting and poor planning led to staggering delays in response over the next five hours, according to the state commission's report.

What could have been an oil spill covering a few acres became one that stretched 1,100 miles, said Walter Parker, the commission's chairman.

"They were not prepared to respond at all," Parker said, referring to Alyeska. "They did not have a trained team ... The equipment was buried under several feet of snow."

The commission's report dedicated an entire chapter to failures by Alyeska, which was formed by the oil companies to run a pipeline stretching from the Arctic Ocean

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to the Valdez terminal. BP had the biggest stake in the consortium and essentially ran the first days of containment efforts in Prince William Sound an inlet on the south coast of Alaska.

"What happened in Alaska was determined by decisions coming from (BP in) Houston," Plater said.

Alyeska officials were notified within minutes of the Valdez spill, but it took seven hours for the consortium to get its first helicopter in the air with a Coast Guard investigator. A barge that was supposed to be carrying containment equipment had to be reloaded and did not arrive on the scene until 12 hours after the spill.

During the spill, Alyeska only had enough booms to surround a single tanker. The few skimmers it had to scoop up oil were out of commission once they filled up because no tank barge was available to handle recovered oil.

"Exxon quickly realized Alyeska was not responding, so 24 hours into the spill Exxon without consultation said, 'We're taking it over,'" said Dennis Kelso, former commissioner of the Alaska Department of Environmental Conservation. "That was not necessarily a bad thing."

BP's role in the Valdez spill has been far less publicized than Exxon's, in part because the state commission wanted to stay focused and avoid fingerpointing by saying who ran Alyeska in its report. Plater said he now regrets that approach.

"In retrospect, it could've focused attention on BP and created transparency which would've changed the internal culture," he said. "As we see the internal culture appears not to have changed with tragic results."

According to Alyeska, BP owned a controlling 50.01 percent share in the consortium in 1989, while a half-dozen other oil companies had smaller stakes. Since then, BP's share in Alyeska has dropped to 46.9 percent, with the next highest owner Conoco-Phillips Inc. at 28.3 percent. The consortium works like a corporation with owners voting based on their percentage shares.

Alyeska's chief executive officer was in 1989, and is currently, a BP employee who's on the company payroll, said Alyeska spokeswoman Michelle Egan.

BP spokesman Robert Wine declined by e-mail to comment on the company's role in the Valdez spill, saying the incident was already examined thoroughly.

"We can't add to something that has been so thoroughly and publicly investigated in the past, and the results of which have been so robustly and effectively implemented," he said.

Many who observed both disasters say there are striking parallels.

For example, during BP's permit process for the Deepwater Horizon, the company apparently predicted a catastrophic spill was unlikely and if it were to happen, the

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company had the best technology available. Prior to the 1989 spill, Alyeska made a similar case, arguing that such a spill was unlikely and would be "further reduced because the majority of the tankers ... are of American registry and all of these are piloted by licensed masters or pilots."

Critics say the tools in both spills have been largely the same, as has BP's lack of preparedness. Then as now, the cleanup tools used across the industry are booms, skimmers and dispersants.

David Pettit, who helped represent Exxon after the Alaska spill, said he knew BP was the "main player in Alyeska" even though everyone at the time was more focused on Exxon's role.

"This is the same company that was drilling in 5,000 feet of water in 2010 knowing that what they had promised ... was no more likely to do any good now than it did in 1989," said Pettit, now a senior attorney at the Natural Resources Defense Council. "It's the same cleanup techniques."

For the Gulf spill, a 100-ton containment box had to be built from scratch and wasn't deployed until two weeks after the spill, leading some to question why such emergency measures weren't ready to begin with.

"If you've told the government there's not a serious risk of a major spill, why should you spend shareholder money building a 100-ton steel box you've publicly claimed you don't think you'll ever use?" said Pettit.

Since the Gulf explosion, BP's companywide preparedness and safety record have come under sharp focus.

Onshore, BP has been criticized for the pace of improvements at some refineries. Government officials gave BP a massive \$87 million fine for failing to make improvements in the five years since a blast killed 15 at its massive Texas City refinery. BP is appealing the fine.

For those who endured the Valdez spill and are now watching another catastrophe unfold, industry improvements aren't coming fast enough.

"We've gone 20 years since Exxon Valdez and have advanced ourselves as a nation and world tremendously, yet the ability to control and deal with something of this magnitude still has not been addressed," said former Homer Mayor John Calhoun, who choked up at the memories. "This is as serious and difficult a situation as you can possibly imagine."

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Associated Press Writer Ramit Plushnick-Masti in Houston contributed to this report.

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