



Sequel to the Exxon Valdez

March 24, 2009 | By Dan Becker and James Gerstenzang and Dan Becker is director of the Safe Climate Campaign, an environmental advocacy group based in Washington. James Gerstenzang, a former Los Angeles Times correspondent, is a Washington writer.

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Four minutes after midnight on March 24, 1989, the Exxon Valdez went aground on the Bligh Reef in Alaska's Prince William Sound, fouling beaches, killing thousands of sea otters, bald eagles and other wildlife -- and sinking the reputation of an oil industry already wracked by ecological disaster.

The 10.8-million-gallon oil spill was not the biggest up to that point. There have been larger since. But in that grinding, steel-against-shoal instant, it became emblematic of all that was wrong with the way the U.S. gets and uses oil. And 20 years later? We use more oil, and much of it still travels by sea.

Oil remains at the heart of a warming climate -- a slow-motion crisis that, writ large, threatens to do to our global atmosphere what the Exxon Valdez did to Prince William Sound.

With the 1989 disaster, the oil industry's standing as an American institution was so damaged that nearly two decades later, even with a Republican president and GOP majority in Congress, it was unable to win approval for drilling in the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge.

Even the campaign-fired chants of "drill baby, drill" during the autumn -- and the relaxation of the moratorium on offshore drilling -- did little to open up coastal waters to oil extraction.

And now, an Exxon subsidiary is proposing to convert to oil the tar sands in the wilderness of Canada's Alberta Province -- an environmentally risky proposition that raises the prospect of yet another Exxon Valdez, only this time on land.

The oil industry has sought to rebrand itself (and why not, given its record?) The result: Oil companies are moving to de-oil themselves.

British Petroleum is simply BP. In its advertising and corporate identity, it has adopted the tagline "Beyond Petroleum."

The American Petroleum Institute, the industry's lobbying arm, tells us that oil companies can bring up oil from beneath the ocean using dozens of miles of tentacle-like hoses that surface at only one drilling platform, lowering the risk and visual pollution of myriad off-shore operations.

Placards on subway cars and buses across the nation's capital promote Chevron's exhortation to Washingtonians to "join us" in car-pooling more and plugging-in less. The company is happy to tell us what to do to solve the nation's energy problems; it is saying less about what it will do.

But the rebranding and advertising miss this central point: Tankers move millions of gallons of oil each day from some of the world's most pristine corners, where it is found, to some of its most densely populated quarters, where it is used.

Meanwhile, the oil industry says it has solved the problems that the Exxon Valdez drew to stark attention in all its bird- and beach-befouling blackness.

Has it?

There have been at least 13 leaks of 40,000 gallons or more from drilling sites in U.S. waters alone over the past decade. Loading and unloading oil tankers routinely produces leaks, and serious spills occur every year at sea and in coastal waters.

2008: A barge on the Mississippi River near New Orleans collides with a tanker, spilling much of the barge's load of nearly half a million gallons of heavy fuel.

2007: The tanker Hebei Spirit spills 2.8 million gallons of heavy crude oil off the South Korean coast.

2006: A tanker carrying 530,000 gallons of oil sinks off the coast of the Philippines, prompting a massive clean-up effort as oil seeps up from the ship's deep-water resting place.

Across 20 years and millions of nautical miles, the world has not traveled very far. Oil is a filthy business.

And the Exxon Valdez itself? Exxon repaired it, renamed it, and sold it. When last spotted, it was transporting oil through the waters of East Asia.

The real solution is ending our nation's addiction to oil. President George W. Bush was actually right about that.

The oil industry is happy to sell us all the oil we want. But the carmakers determine how much we guzzle.

Automakers need to take the biggest single step to break the addiction and cut the risk of disaster at sea, on shore, and ultimately in the atmosphere: Make cars get dramatically better fuel economy.

They can't spill what we don't buy.

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