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CLEANING UP AFTER EXXON

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It has been 10 years since the Exxon Valdez ran aground, spewing both 11.2 million gallons of crude oil and a lot of bad publicity on Alaska's Prince William Sound. Neither has been cleared away easily.

The spill is what Adam Kolten, Arctic Refuge campaign director for the Alaska Wilderness League, calls a watershed event for the environmental movement, taking its place alongside Three Mile Island and Love Canal. And although "Exxon likes to tell a lot of anecdotes and show some pretty pictures, scientists have shown that the damage is far more severe and lasting than anyone previously thought."

In the 1991 civil settlement, Exxon agreed to pay \$900 million to the state of Alaska and federal government over a 10-year-period. So far, almost half of the money, overseen by a council of six government trustees, has been dedicated to land acquisition, ensuring undamaged habitat for species struggling to recover. Already, 650,000 acres have been purchased and merged with existing wildlife refuges, and state and national parks.

Much of the remainder has been invested in research and monitoring. Of the 30 species most impacted, the bald eagle was the first to recover to pre-spill populations and productivity, and the only one to do so by 1998. Some species, like the harbor seal, may never recover. Already in serious decline, 13 percent of the seal population died as a result of the spill, and numbers have continued to drop annually. Molly McCammon, executive director of the Exxon Valdez Restoration Office, points out, "Nature is the best restorer, but it will take many years."

For some, this isn't fast enough. Allen E. Smith, Alaska regional director for the Wilderness Society, says the real issues are still not being addressed, and getting industry to respond is "like pushing a wet noodle uphill." For instance, he says, there are still no double-hulled oil tankers operating in Prince William Sound, even though a transition to them is called for by the Oil Provision Act of 1990 as a precaution against future spills.

An Exxon Valdez Trustee Council symposium planned for late March in Anchorage will address lessons learned in the last decade of clean-up but, according to Smith, "The biggest lesson is that no matter what we do, we're still vulnerable."

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