

EVOS Archive Project Now Online

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Jay Barrett/KMXT

The State of Alaska has completed a two year project archiving documents from the Exxon Valdez Oil Spill and its legal aftermath. In the end, according to state senior archivist Larry Hibpshman, the project staff waded through 3,500 standard file boxes located in Juneau and Anchorage and whittled them down to 918 that will go in to permanent storage at the state archives.

“People around the world are going to want to know for a very long time what happened. You know, it will include people like scholars who want to write books on the events, and it might include legal scholars who might want to review the material if a similar situation comes up. And there are many others, but here also ordinary citizens who want to know what really happened, and of course “what really happened” is a relative term, but our records will reflect that, as well.”

There are another 2,600 boxes in the possession of the Department of Law, which will be added to the archive once they are no longer needed by that agency.

Hibpshman said the number of boxes could be reduced by such an extent because of the tremendous amount duplication associated with legal documents. The total document count was 18,500,000 pages. The 918 boxes weigh about 13-tons.

But sorting the documents was just the first step. Then they had to be cataloged.

“So we created a database that includes acronyms dictionary of about 2,400 terms, and also lists of everybody we could identify who was involved with Exxon Valdez, either with the spill or the remediation or the litigation. And also a list of other resources, and when we tried we did that not merely to list other archives and libraries. Legal activities were like the spill itself; they just spread out deep and wide, and so we included government agencies around the country that had material, and some industry resources we know about and also some public affairs things.”

Hibpshman says the cataloged archives are already proving its value, as two University of Alaska Students working on a project about the news coverage of the spill and aftermath have already used it for research.

“Records are important because they document people’s lives. Archives are about people. The Exxon Valdez was an event of world significance.”

One full-time archivist position was funded by the National Archive and was part of a three-person staff that went through the documents. Hibpshman also credited a public advisory board for its input and guidance.

