

Sen. Stevens, Others, Recall EVOS 25 Years Later

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Jeremy Hsieh/KTOO

It's been 25 years today (Monday) since the Exxon Valdez tanker ran aground, spilling hundreds of thousands of barrels of oil in Prince William Sound.

Around the Capitol Building, the memories for many are still fresh, as Jeremy Hsieh found out.

Twenty-five years ago, Marta Lastufka saw a puzzling ill omen. She was at a party where a woman was giving readings with tarot cards.

"And everybody kept getting this scary card, it was like, the death card," she said, "You know, I don't know what this means, but something is going to happen that's going to affect all of you. And that was probably just a few days before the Valdez oil spill. And then we realized, oh, that was it."

The spill brought a frenzy of activity to Alaska — workers, reporters and profiteers. Legislative aide Ron Clark had a front seat.

"At the time the Exxon-Valdez went aground, I was a special assistant to Gov. Steve Cowper."

Clark and the governor flew up to Valdez a few days after the spill. They got off the plane, and Clark remembers the governor asking him, "Are you ready for this?"

"And I said, 'I dunno, what's this?' He says, 'You'll see.'"

"The doors open and, like, two dozen Klieg lights flash on. All these camera lenses suddenly are trained on him, microphones being thrust at him, and people shouting questions, and, and, he kind of pauses before he wades into this, and he turns to me and says -- 'That's 'this'. This is what I meant.' And he just -- pwoow! -- walked into this amazing scrum of press people."

Clark says entrepreneurs came, too, by the thousands, clawing for a few minutes of the governor's time to hawk their cleanup solutions.

"Here, governor, here! Here's the cure to the spill, here's what you need to--this product is just what you need!" One guy showed up with nylon mesh bags full of chicken feathers, he said.

It was supposed to be an alternative to oil boom.

Within a few weeks, Clark remembers bankers' boxes filled with spill-related mail lining the hallways of the Capitol's third floor.

"You know, there was a whole section on sea otters. You know, oiled

sea otters: clean them and release them? Kill them humanely? Every category of letter had a banker's box, and we just had piles and piles and piles of these letters that just kept pouring in.

The impact wasn't so immediate for Sen. Gary Stevens. He was in Kodiak at the time teaching history. There, the first weeks were part of an awful waiting game. The news reached Kodiak weeks before balls of crude oil fouled the beaches.

"It was just a horrendous experience as we watched that oil over time slowly move out of Prince William Sound and eventually hit the beaches of Kodiak. We knew it was going to happen, and it was just like one of those inexorable things that you know it's going to happen, you know it's going to happen, and then finally it does."

Stevens remembers the sight of "Oiled birds and the oiled animals and the oiled workers as they were out there trying to clean it up."

The workers at sea needed a way to clean themselves up, too. Rep. Paul Seaton was a commercial fisherman at the time and one of his fish tenders was repurposed for just that. He put an old house with a boiler and tanks aboard the ship. It supplied fresh water and served as a decontamination unit.

"Because all these people were out there cleaning up and they had no place to take showers, or wash, or wash any clothes for the first part," he said. "And so we became the vessel that was out there providing cleanup for the clean-uppers."