Alaskans bring first-hand experience, expertise to University of New Hampshire oil spill response forum

Twenty-five years after the *Exxon Valdez* and 5 years after the Deepwater Horizon disaster, scientific experts and industry specialists are still learning from the events, and how these lessons learned can be applied to the Arctic.

In October, nearly 40 high level experts shared their candid views, observations and findings at a two-day oil spill response forum, Oil Spill Response: 25 Years After the *Exxon Valdez* and in the Wake of Deepwater Horizon, What Have We Learned and What Are We Missing? The forum was organized by the University of New Hampshire, Center for Spills in the Environment and School of Marine Science and Ocean Engineering. For two full days, panelists explored gaps that still need to be filled, and how these two devastating spills can inform future spill responses and Arctic policy. Lynda Giguere, Director of Public Outreach, was able to attend on behalf of Cook Inlet RCAC.

Among the invited expert panelists were many prominent Alaskans who played key roles in the responses or who are recognized as leaders in science and Arctic policy, including Fran Ulmer, U.S. Arctic Research Program; Larry Dietrick, Director of Alaska's Spill Prevention and Response Division (retired); Marilyn Heiman Director, U.S. Arctic Program, The Pew Charitable Trusts; Ed Page, Chief of Coast Guard Operations, *Exxon Valdez* Oil Spill and Marine Exchange of Alaska; Robert Spies, Principal, Applied Marine Sciences & Chief Science Advisor to Governments on the *Exxon Valdez* Oil Spill Restoration Program; Tim Robertson, Director of Nuka Research; and James Ayers, first executive director of EVOS Trustee Council and US Advisor on Deepwater Horizon.

Media panel included (l to r): David Kennedy, Panel Chairman, (NOAA), Charles Wohlforth, Alaska Science Writer, Thad Allen, Admiral, U.S. Coast Guard, retired, Mark Schrope Freelance Writer and Editor, Justin Kenney, Senior Director of Communications, The Pew Charitable Trusts, Anne Thompson, NBC Universal, Sean Carroll U. S. Coast Guard, Chief of Response, Sector Boston

The first day's panel discussions were devoted to the history of oil spills in the United States, sharing first-hand, "on scene" experiences from environmental responses, and exploring the roles of science and media in oil spill coverage. Day 2 was devoted to discussing future spill scenarios, such as those anticipated, particularly, in the Arctic and onshore; social and public health, policy and politics and the path forward.

Even considering the lessons learned and changes brought about by the *Exxon Valdez*, many of the same large issues that occurred during the *Exxon Valdez* happened again during the Deepwater Horizon. And although the conference was called an "oil spill response forum," there was very little talk about oil spill response tactics, technology or capability. Discussions instead revolved around how to manage large spills and mitigate impacts, the importance of engaging good scientific studies, and figuring out how groups of oil spill responders can work together with scientists, stakeholders, community leaders, politicians and public officials during such events.

A recurring theme throughout the two-day conference was the difficulty of understanding the short or long term impacts of oil spills without background data to recognize changes that are naturally occurring in the environment. Scientists working with the *Exxon Valdez* concluded that ecosystem studies are valuable in understanding perturbations; a thorough study of injuries and emerging injuries and strong peer review are necessary; there are long term dividends of ecosystem studies; and dealing with uncertainty logically is key to moving from findings to good policy decisions. Scientists participating during the Deepwater Horizon cited the need for better and quicker peer review and baseline

data to identify problems and analyze the results of competing studies. As with the *Exxon Valdez*, there was a paucity of baseline information to reference beforehand regarding the unique science that was required by the sub-surface Deepwater Horizon spill. (Many of Cook Inlet RCAC's studies have been conducted with an eye towards better understanding Cook Inlet baseline conditions and natural variability.)

Panelists recognized the value of Alaska's regional citizens' advisory councils (RCACs) as an effective vehicle to involve citizens and stakeholders who have the most at stake during an oil spill. The Oil Pollution Act, signed into law in 1990 (OPA 90) as a result of the *Exxon Valdez*, cited industry and citizen complacency as a key factor leading up to the spill. To combat that complacency, OPA 90 created the RCACs as a mechanism to create partnerships of local citizens, federal, state and local leaders, and industry as partners in safeguarding their waters.

No such sweeping legislation as OPA 90 resulted from the Deepwater Horizon disaster, although it did lead to the creation of science and research entities focusing on oil spills, such as the Gulf of Mexico Research Institute. Even with Alaska's success, several Gulf Coast entities have tried, but so far have failed in their efforts to organize RCACs after the Alaska model. With the absence of RCACs in the Gulf, panelists discussed other ways to involve local citizens in oil spill prevention and response, such as adding a local on-scene coordinator to the Incident Command System (ICS) structure, establishing a corps of trained volunteers that can be mobilized in the event of an incident, ICS training for local citizens, and stakeholder participation within the Unified Command's Joint Information Center—which is similar to a role Cook Inlet RCAC routinely plays during oil spill response in Cook Inlet.

The forum provided multiple opportunities to ask questions, and share valuable insights and conclusions gleaned from successes and failures, personal stories, public policy experience, analysis and treatment of resulting social issues, and opportunities to delve into the looming challenges of drilling and marine transportation anticipated in the Arctic. The well-organized conference served as a reminder of how far we've come in Alaska, which has advanced light years in oil spill prevention and response since the *Exxon Valdez* and OPA 90; to how much work still needs to be done.

These notes are just highlights of a few of those presentations and discussions. The PowerPoint presentations are posted online on the University of New Hampshire website. For more information, visit: http://unh.edu/universityevents/events/osr-forum/