

Long-term Recovery after a Spill

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Prior to the Deepwater Horizon drilling disaster, the largest oil spill to occur in U.S. waters was the Exxon Valdez spill in Alaska in March, 1989. The Exxon Valdez spill has been well studied, and provides twenty years worth of information on how ecosystems recover from spills. Unfortunately, many species don't recover well from spills and even twenty one years after Exxon Valdez, there are still two species that continue to be listed as "not recovered," these are the Pacific herring and pigeon guillemot. There are ten species that are still "recovering", including sea otters, killer whales, clams, and mussels. Commercial fishing, recreation and tourism are among the "human services" still listed as "recovering." The ten species listed as "recovered" include bald eagles, pink and sockeye salmon and harbor seals. There are five resources listed as "unknown," including the cutthroat trout, rockfish and subtidal communities.

In addition to direct species impacts, oil spills can have devastating impacts on fisheries. After this spill, fisheries for salmon, herring, crab, shrimp, rockfish and sablefish were closed in 1989 throughout Prince William Sound, Cook Inlet, the outer Kenai coast, Kodiak and the Alaska Peninsula. Shrimp and salmon commercial fisheries remained closed in parts of Prince William Sound through 1990.

Prior to the spill, herring populations in the Sound were increasing as documented by record harvests in the late 1980s. However, four years after the spill a dramatic collapse of the fishery occurred, and the herring population has never rebounded. The overall 1993 harvest was only about 14 percent of the 1992 harvest, and the 1989 year class was one of the smallest cohorts ever to return as spawning adults.

One of the largest impacts to fisheries after the Exxon Valdez spill was from the perception of contamination. The whole state had trouble marketing their catches, and suspension of one fishing season for most of the Gulf of Alaska resulted in buyers securing supplies from other producers. Many Alaskan producers were never able to recover the lost markets. This had a devastating long-term impact that Exxon never recognized in its settlement offers.

In addition to fisheries losses, the tourism industry immediately lost over 26,000 jobs and more than \$2.4 billion in sales. By 2003, it had recovered somewhat, but has never fully recovered since some vacationers still think of the area as contaminated.

The Exxon Valdez spilled 11 million gallons of crude oil into the ocean. The Gulf of Mexico spill released 200 million gallons of oil. This means that every 5 days, an oil spill the size of Exxon Valdez was released into the Gulf of Mexico. Twenty one years after the spill, Alaskan waters are still recovering, and many beaches and coastal areas are still contaminated with oil. Many species are still recovering, and some haven't recovered at all. Given the catastrophic nature of the Exxon Valdez spill, and its lingering impacts 21 years later, it is becoming increasingly clear that the impacts of the Deepwater Horizon spill will last many years, and possibly even decades.