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Alaska fishing town braces for U.S. Supreme Court look at Exxon Valdez spill

By RACHEL D'ORO
The Associated Press

CORDOVA, Alaska | For many in this coastal town, the 1989 Exxon Valdez disaster was an event so crushing that hard-bitten fishermen still get teary-eyed recalling ruined livelihoods, broken marriages and suicides.

But mostly, people in Cordova talk about the discouraging wait for legal retribution for the worst oil spill in U.S. history.

It has been almost 19 years since the tanker Exxon Valdez ran aground at Alaska's Bligh Reef, spurring 11 million gallons of crude into the rich fishing waters of Prince William Sound. In 1994, an Anchorage jury awarded victims \$5 billion in punitive damages. That amount has since been cut in half by other courts on appeals by Exxon Mobil Corp.

Now the town of 2,200 looks anxiously to the U.S. Supreme Court, which will hear arguments Wednesday from Exxon on why the company should not have to pay punitive damages at all.

Scores of Cordova residents are among almost 33,000 plaintiffs — including commercial fishermen, Alaska Natives, landowners, businesses and local governments — who could see the \$2.5 billion judgment taken away by the high court.

"With this legal system the way it has been protracted out, people can't put it behind them," said Cordova Mayor Tim Joyce. "The final recompense has never been made."

Steve Smith, a 69-year-old Cordova fisherman, worries that big business will prevail.

"I really wonder, what do you do if you don't get a just decision out of the Supreme Court," he said on his boat, Prince William. "I mean, there's no other court to take it to. What do you got left, really? Anarchy?"

Exxon contends it should not be liable for the actions of the Exxon Valdez skipper, Joseph Hazelwood, when the supertanker ran aground on March 24, 1989.

Prosecutors said Hazelwood was drunk, but he denied it and was acquitted of the charge in criminal court.

Cordova, 45 miles from Bligh Reef, was not directly touched by the slick.

But residents say the spill was a crippling blow for a town so dependent on commercial fishing, particularly for herring.

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