



Supreme Court hears Exxon Valdez arguments

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by Brian Mooar
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WASHINGTON, D.C. -- Lawyers for victims of the Exxon Valdez spill and Exxon-Mobil Corporation will square off before the U.S. Supreme Court Wednesday.

At issue is \$2.5 billion in punitive damages.

Exxon says it's paid its dues while those hurt by the spill say you can't replace what has been lost.

It's been nearly 19 years since the Exxon Valdez ran into Bligh Reef spilling 11 million gallons of crude oil and transforming Prince William Sound from pristine wilderness into a cautionary tale that stunned the world.

On the eve of the Supreme Court arguments, Gov. Sarah Palin and a small group of Alaskans made their case in the court of public opinion -- at the National Press Club.

"Deterrence here is the operative word, when were talking about these punitive damages," Palin said. "We do not want this to ever happen again to any other community, state individual."

The jury in the 1994 federal case found Exxon reckless for allowing Captain Joseph Hazelwood, a struggling alcoholic, to run a ship.

Exxon is asking the high court to set aside \$2.5 billion in punitive damages -- half of what the jury awarded in the 1994 court case.

The oil giant says it's already fulfilled its responsibilities under the Federal Clean Water Act and a 19th century maritime law.

In a statement the company said:

"The company voluntarily compensated most plaintiffs within a year of the spill, and has spent over \$3.5 billion, including compensatory payments, cleanup payments, settlements and fines. We do not believe further punishment is warranted."

Residents disagree.

"There's been a lot of debate about the dollar value expended on the cleanup effort, and I'm here today to tell you that's irrelevant. What matters is that the cleanup was ineffective," said Travis Vlasoff from the village of Tatitlek.

Residents say even the millions awarded after the accident weren't enough to pay for lives and livelihoods changed forever.

Bill Webber of Cordova lost half his income when the herring population was decimated overnight.

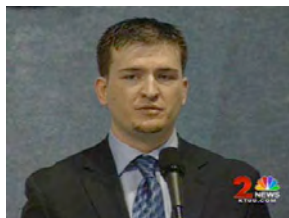
"Herring, we haven't fished it for 20 years, that's half my income," Webber said.

State leaders joined residents in calling for quick justice.

"Those people in Cordova and all along our coastal communities, our native corporations, our fishermen who've been so adversely affected -- it is time for them to be able to see some justice and closure in this," Palin said.



Gov. Sarah Palin



Travis Vlasoff from the village of Tatitlek



Bill Webber of Cordova lost half his income when the herring population was decimated overnight.



Alaska Sen. Lisa Murkowski



Sylvia Lange

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"In 1988, a fishing permit in Prince William Sound was worth \$400,000," Alaska Sen. Lisa Murkowski said. "As of 2004, the value of each such permit was less than \$70,000 -- a drop of 82 percent."

Murkowski, Sen. Ted Stevens and Congressman Don Young have already signed friends of the court briefs for the case.

More than 30 states are standing beside Alaska on the matter. They say the company should face the same liability on water that it does on land.

Some say they're not seeking closure or justice, simply an end.

"I don't use that word, closure. I hate it. There is no closure. There is no justice, there's just an end," said Sylvia Lange, a spill victim. "For us there is no justice. We may win. But it's not justice because its 19 years later."



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