



Monday, March 10, 2008

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Exxon Still Sails Single-Hulled in Alaska

February 28, 2008 05:02 PM ET | [Marianne Lavelle](#) | [Permanent Link](#)

As we write in [this story](#), Exxon Mobil is telling the Supreme Court that it has paid enough for the worst oil spill in U.S. waters, the 1989 wreck of its Valdez supertanker that poured 11 million gallons of crude into Alaska's Prince William Sound.

In its fight to avoid paying \$2.5 billion in punitive damages—a sum that amounts to three weeks of the company's astounding profits—Exxon's lawyer, Walter Dellinger, asked the justices to look at the \$3.5 billion that the company had already spent on cleanup and to settle state and federal fines. "That amount is enough to deter anyone from anything," Dellinger said.

But it has not been enough to deter Exxon from continuing to use a single-hulled tanker to ship its crude oil out of Alaska through Prince William Sound. Ray Botto, spokesman for SeaRiver Maritime, the wholly owned Exxon affiliate that now runs the oil company's U.S. shipping operations, confirms that one of the three tankers that the company uses in Prince William Sound has a single hull.

The other two, as well as the three that Exxon's SeaRiver operates in the Gulf of Mexico, all have double hulls. The year after the Valdez spill, Congress enacted the Oil Pollution Act, requiring double-hulled tankers in U.S. waters—but giving companies until 2015 to fully upgrade to a fleet of tankers with an extra protective skin of steel.

Botto says that SeaRiver's operations have been evaluated by federal, state, and regional authorities and have been found to meet or exceed all standards for safe operation and spill prevention. The factors that are key, Botto says, include how well the tankers are maintained,

personnel training and preparation, and the operation of port facilities. He pointed out that SeaRiver has been a winner of the U.S. Coast Guard's [William M. Benkert Award](#) for outstanding marine environmental protection and the [Legacy Award](#) by the Pacific States/British Columbia Oil Spill Task Force, as well as being recognized for its participation in the Washington State Department of Ecology's [Exceptional Compliance Program](#), a voluntary program in which companies commit to meet safety goals in excess of federal standards.

But I asked Botto: All things being equal, isn't a double-hulled tanker still more protective than a single-hulled vessel? "It has been debated that in certain types of events, 'Does a double-hulled get you something a single-hulled does not?' " he says. "Those debates continue. The point I want to emphasize is that no one dimension is going to guarantee you overall success. It requires all the factors we talked about.

"Prevention is what this whole thing is about," Botto says. "And I imagine whether you're a resident of the state of Alaska, or a worker, or in our case, someone that operates tankers, we share the same goal—of not having something get into the water."

The debate over the value of double-hulled tankers is, indeed, an old one, and a history of how the oil industry in the 1970s lobbied against a double-hull requirement in Alaska is in [this *New York Times* story](#), which ran soon after the Valdez accident.

Roy Mason, a British tanker industry analyst who is editor of the publication *Oil Movements*, tells me today there's a sizable premium in the market for chartering a double-hulled vessel; it's about 38 percent more expensive than moving oil in a ship with a single hull.

The debate, of course, is all about whether the protection you get is worth that premium. I don't have any scientific studies, only this note: All 24 of the major oil spills (costing more than \$1 million) from tankers or tank barges in U.S. waters since 1990 involved vessels with single hulls, according to a footnote on Page 29 of [this Government Accountability Office report](#).

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Oil and more oil

Pres. Jimmy Carter warned us back in the late 1970's that we

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Feb 28, 2008 20:01:41 PM