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Fishing town braces for Supreme Court look at Exxon spill

By Rachel D'Oro

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's 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 ExxonMobil 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



Media Credit: AP

Nancy Bird shows oil-soaked soil collected for Smith Island in Prince William Sound on May 20, 2007, in Cordova, Alaska. The U.S.

Supreme Court is scheduled to hear arguments Wednesday from Exxon about why the company should not have to pay the \$2.5 billion punitive damages awarded to victims of the disaster that happened 19 years ago.

boat Prince William. "I mean, there's no other court to take it to. What do you got left, really? Anarchy?"

The spill soiled 1,200 miles of shoreline and killed hundreds of thousands of birds and other marine animals, inflicting environmental injuries that have not fully recovered, according to numerous scientific studies.

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, with 53 million gallons of oil in its hold. Cordova itself, 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, whose numbers plummeted several years after the spill and have yet to return.

The herring catch used to kick-start the entire town after the quieter winter months. Herring meant a quick bounty for fishermen and ready cash for boat insurance, equipment repairs and new gear. For many, it represented a half year's earnings. Herring also brought auxiliary ships, processor vessels, and plane crews for spotting the fish.

"A whole lifestyle has gone," said restaurant owner Libbie Graham. "Life was great. I mean, you worked hard but you were rewarded for it."

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