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Exxon Valdez in Sup. Court

Wednesday, Feb 27, 2008 - 08:00 AM

Photo Video



By NBC News Channel E-mail The infamous 1989 Exxon Valdez oil spill will be in the spotlight today at the U.S. Supreme Court.

Exxon Mobil argues that it shouldn't be forced to pay \$2.5 billion dollars in punitive damages citing a maritime law that dates back to the year 1818. But Alaska natives argue that the company knowingly allowed a struggling alcoholic to run a giant ship with disastrous consequences and should be punished for its recklessness.

It's been nearly 19 years since the Exxon Valdez ran into Bligh Reef spilling 11 million gallons of crude that transformed Prince William Sound from pristine wilderness into an ecological disaster zone.

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Today, the long legal battle over that spill makes its way to the U.S. Supreme Court. Exxon Mobil argues it's already fulfilled its legal obligations, - paying \$3.5 billion for the clean-up and hundreds of millions to Alaskan natives.

Any more, it says, would be unconstitutionally excessive. Alaska natives disagree.

Travis Vlasoff, a native from the village of Tatitlek, says "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."

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

Residents like Cordova resident Bill Webber who says "herring -- we haven't fished it for 20 years. That's half my income."

Nearly 33,000 Alaskans stand to share \$2.5 billion or nothing.

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Alaska Governor Sarah Palin says "it is time for them to be able to see some justice and some closure on this."



Cordova resident Sylvia Lange says "you know, I don't use that word, Closure. I hate it. There is no closure. There is no justice, there's just an end. We may win. But its not justice because its nineteen years later."

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