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Residents worry Supreme Court won't deliver justice

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Residents worry Supreme Court won't deliver justice

by Mike Ross
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CORDOVA, Alaska -- Wednesday's Supreme Court hearing is causing a lot of anxiety for Alaskans who are part of the lawsuit against Exxon Mobil, many of whom are afraid they won't see justice.

Fishermen here say they still struggle with the economic effects of the spill, nearly 20 years later.

The Court's decision to hear Exxon's appeal has sent a winter wind-like chill through the community here. And many are frustrated.

Steve Smith, 69, has been a commercial fisherman in Cordova since 1963. He traveled to Washington D.C. for Wednesday's hearing. Like many others, he worries about what the court may or may not do.

"We all got pretty nervous that this was gonna be a political decision in favor of big business instead of a legal decision for what's really right," he said.

Cordova had the biggest fishing fleet in Prince William Sound before the spill.

Osa Shultz and her husband, Rick, have been commercial fishermen since 1980. They say the spill had an economic domino effect on life here. Fish died. Fishermen went broke. And the Schultz's boat trailer business consequently collapsed.

The impact on their lives continues almost 20 years later.

"People don't have the retirements," Shultz said. "We're in our 50s and we don't have a retirement fund and we'd just like to catch-up to what we thought we were going to be heading into in the year 1989."

Commercial fisherman Jack Hopkins says before the spill, Prince William Sound was alive with herring.

"About the same time that the Valdez went up on the reef, we were ready to go herring seining," Hopkins said.

Hopkins showed pictures of multitudes of boats ready to head out on the Sound. Be he says herring fisheries still haven't recovered. And fishermen, who struggled to survive financially, found that their children's futures ultimately paid the price of Exxon's negligence.

"That just blew that completely out of the water," he said. "All you were doing was just treading water, hoping that you could survive with your family through the winter, so there wasn't anything being put away and set aside for going to college or things like that."

Hopkins, Schultz and Smith are among nearly 33,000 people hoping for a share of the \$2.5 billion punitive damages Exxon has been ordered to pay.

The Supreme Court's decision last fall to hear Exxon's appeal makes people in Cordova very nervous.



Steve Smith has been a commercial fisherman in Cordova since 1963. (Eric Sowl/KTUU-TV)



Osa Shultz and her husband, Rick, have been commercial fishermen since 1980. (Eric Sowl/KTUU-TV)



Commercial fisherman Jack Hopkins (Eric Sowl/KTUU-TV)



Cordova Mayor Tim Joyce (Eric Sowl/KTUU-TV)



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Jennifer Gibbins, director of the advocacy group Prince William Soundkeeper (Eric Sowl/KTUU-TV)

"For the rest of the country, it probably isn't, but for us in Cordova, and in other places in Prince William Sound, it's a big event," said Mayor Tim Joyce.

Also on the Web

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The biggest concern for many here, says the mayor, is that the Court won't look at how much Exxon should have to pay; rather, the issue it now considers involves whether any compensation will ever be delivered.

"It's really one of those things where it's either zero or \$2.5 billion," Joyce said. "I guess that's kinda the worry for some people, is that it could be zero."

Jennifer Gibbins, director of the advocacy group Prince William Soundkeeper, is among the Cordova residents who traveled to the nation's capitol for Wednesday's hearing.

"I think it's to make our presence known -- to make every effort that we can to make sure that the court knows that we exist and that we want justice," she said. "More than the disappointment of not getting paid is the denial of justice."

After waiting nearly two decades, many in Cordova fear that for them, justice delayed will be justice denied.

Cordova fishermen have set up a [website](#) to tell their stories about the impact of the spill.

On the other side of the equation, Exxon too has set up a [website](#) responding to the ongoing court case.

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Alaska News

High Court could reduce punitive damages for Exxon Valdez disaster



Two justices suggested that perhaps a reasonable award would equal twice the amount of money the company has paid to compensate victims for economic losses.

Supreme Court hears Exxon Valdez arguments



Lawyers for victims of the Exxon Valdez spill and Exxon-Mobil Corporation will square off before the U.S. Supreme Court Wednesday.



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