

Take a hard look at the numbers

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A study recently released as part of the Cook Inlet Regional Citizens Advisory Council reiterates a fact of oil transportation in Cook Inlet: while oil tankers have the lowest incidence of mishaps, they also carry the greatest consequences in the event of an accident.

Oil transportation is part of the risk-reward equation of oil development in the inlet. Alaska's RCACs were created in the aftermath of the 1989 Exxon Valdez disaster to give the public a way to become involved in the oversight of oil transportation with the intent of preventing the mistakes that led to the disaster.

With that role in mind, the Cook Inlet RCAC's risk assessment project gives us plenty to think about. As part of the study, some 16 years of data were analyzed, and 1,000 different spill scenarios ranked by probability and risk.

The fact is that oil transportation will always carry a risk. This study is able to quantify that risk, putting into numbers what we can expect in the future. Knowing the possibilities and being continually aware of potential dangers is crucial in preventing a disaster from happening, and in being prepared to deal with the consequences should the worst happen.

The study also goes into great detail on the probability of other risks -- spills and accidents that involve other types of vessels. And it puts a number to the risk as well: we can expect 3.9 spills per year from vessels operating in the inlet.

While that number may be low, it's still not something we should feel comfortable with.

After all, according to the Cook Inlet RCAC website, "Many people felt that government and industry representatives had become too comfortable in their positions and that complacency was a contributing factor in the Exxon Valdez spill. The 1990 Alaska Oil Spill Commission Report, while discussing the Exxon spill, states, 'success bred complacency; complacency bred neglect; neglect increased the risk until the right combination of errors led to disaster.'"

The next step in the risk assessment is to review the highest risk scenarios, and make suggestions for safety regulation changes. State and federal agencies would need to review and implement any changes. Some changes may be minor enough to implement right away, such as tightening up rules for operating in heavy ice conditions. Some might take time, such as increasing tug services. Either way, a serious appraisal of recommendations by government agencies and the industry is in order to ensure that the concerns of the public are addressed.

There will never be such a thing as risk-free oil transportation in Cook Inlet. But if there are measures we can take to reduce the risk of a spill in the first place, and to mitigate potential consequences in the event of a spill, let's implement them. We'd rather do that now than have to clean up a major spill later.

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