



# Lessons Learned and Final Thoughts — Aleutian Life Forum, Dutch Harbor, Alaska August 17-19, 2005

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To incorporate the opinions from responding organizations, community members, and other forum attendees, round-table discussions were held each afternoon to discuss the lessons learned from the Selendang Ayu incident and the resultant response. The goal was to produce a list of things that were done well in this response as well as those things that could have been done better, with an eye toward passing this information on to other communities so that they might take some preventative measures and potentially avoid some of the pitfalls that we endured.

## General Recommendations

### What went well?

1. The Unified Command Web site was always up to date and easy to browse for responders and community members alike.
2. The Unified Command passed information out to the community every night at an open forum in city council chambers. This allowed community members to address their concerns and have their questions answered. Later, these meetings dropped to once a week and, finally, to once a month.
3. The Unified Command was very good at working with the tribal organizations and landowners. Representatives from the Unified Command met with these organizations independently and often and even talked with village elders at the senior center.

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4. The Unified Command addressed important issues quickly and established work groups to discuss impacts on sensitive coastal areas, commercial fisheries, endangered species, and importance of subsistence organisms.
5. With the aid of local organizations (Alaska Department of Environmental Conservation, Qawalangin Tribe, Museum of the Aleutians, and the Unalaska City High School), the Unified Command sponsored a subsistence round-table and a subsistence fair that were positive outlets for sharing information between locals and responders.

### **What could have been done better?**

1. More input could have been used from local organizations and community members. Several suggestions were made throughout the response that seemed to be ignored by the Unified Command.
2. Establish a local on-scene coordinator in the Unified Command structure. This would allow a locally trusted and respected member of the community to be involved in all levels of the decision making and ensure that local issues were given consideration.
3. Establish oil-spill response training programs in remote communities. This would allow faster reaction time and might save valuable resources before the Unified Command structure comes online.
4. Keep locals informed through other media means. Using fact sheets worked, but information was not updated and was not very visible. While locals were given some opportunities to get current information, many do not have access to the Internet and others still could not attend nightly briefings.
5. Establish and use local resources inside and outside of the Unified Command structure. Though many locals were involved in the cleanup process, many businesses and organizations were not included. Many of the resources that were flown in at considerable expense were available locally and not used.

6. Station resources and trained personnel in remote communities to respond to incidents quickly when “weather windows” are available.

### **Other general suggestions to communities:**

1. Create a “seed” bank of local species to aid in preventing local extinctions, while establishing a record of local diversity. This would also be useful in observing coastal impacts on present species and the introduction of non-native species.
2. Create an intertidal resource map observing distribution, abundance, and diversity of intertidal organisms. This would be useful in determining the impacts of oil spills and could also be used as a long-term monitor of the health of the ecosystem.

### **Topical Recommendations**

In addition to the general lessons learned, specific topics and issues were addressed for the focus of the three days. For each of the round-tables, community members, oil spill responders, and members from other organization were asked for topic-specific comments on the lessons learned good and bad.

**Impact of oil spills on wildlife**— Several organizations took part in this discussion, including: the Alaska Maritime National Wildlife Refuge, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, Alaska Sea Grant, Polaris Environmental, the NOAA Office of Response and Restoration (Hazmat), and the Alaska Oceans Program.

#### **What went well (wildlife)?**

1. Contingency planning evolved over time with agencies and organizations working together to compile all available information.
2. Chris Woodley (USCG), the Unified Command’s community liaison, was locally respected and trusted and worked well to connect the Unified Command structure and community.

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3. The Tiglax (AMNWR) research platform was rapidly deployed and an Unalaskan Tribal member was allowed serve as an escort/liaison.
4. City of Unalaska was helpful in providing volunteers and facilities; for example, the salmon hatchery was used as a bird stabilization laboratory.
5. Unified Command met with community elders to discuss wildlife and anthropology

### **What could have been done better (wildlife)?**

1. Several of the resources needed for wildlife response were not immediately available and took time to ramp up.
2. Discontinuity between government agencies involved in wildlife response confused community members. Because each entity in the Unified Command (Federal, State, and Responsible Party) had a representative environmental contractor, in addition to International Bird Rescue and Research Center, U.S. Fish and Wildlife, and the Alaska Maritime National Wildlife Refuge, the community didn't know to whom or where to turn for guidance.
3. Needed better documentation for communicating with the public. Although some wildlife fact sheets were put up, they were not updated and distributed. Subsistence warnings were delayed beyond the subsistence seasons.
4. Needed bird stabilization kits staged in local areas. This would have allowed for a much faster response with a potential to save more birds.
5. Locals did not sufficiently understand the Unified Command structure nor how the wildlife/environment component fit in.
6. Locals need training on other "spills" materials, such as cargo (soybeans), rats, etc.
7. The turnover rate for response personnel appeared to be continuous. This disrupted established relationships and slowed communication.

8. Need to involve community members in hands-on activities that didn't necessarily require special training (e.g., logistics, wildlife observations). Community volunteers were more than willing but were never resourced.
9. Communicate to the public better and sooner on injury assessment efforts — public wants to know that resources are being studied now and into future. (NRDA process seems secretive and takes a long time.)
10. Community felt like information was being kept from them. Be more open/honest about what information can and cannot be shared now and later and why.
11. Need to communicate better and sooner with stakeholders about what is being done on local lands with permission.
12. Keep steady momentum on updating community on progress, study findings, etc., on a regular basis (despite appearance that interest had declined) and different media/venues.
13. Translate technical information into general layman's terms to understand NRDA data collection. Need more communication to public and landowners.

**Impact of oil spills on fisheries** — Fisheries round-tables addressed many of the same points as the wildlife round-tables, but state and federal response seemed to occupy most of the discussion. Organizations taking part in this discussion, included: Alaska Department of Fish and Game, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, Alaska DEC, NOAA Office of Response and Restoration (Hazmat), City of Unalaska Natural Resources, UniSea, Inc., and University of Alaska Anchorage Institute of Social and Economic Research.

### **What went well (fisheries)?**

1. By pairing Alaska Department of Environmental Conservation with seafood processors, DEC agents were positioned well to respond to processor issues and look for signs of contamination.

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2. The fisheries work group was established early and included the key locally stationed state and federal fisheries managers.
3. Water quality sampling program initiated. Response had evolved significantly from the Kuroshima spill.
4. Alaska DEC environmental contractors, NUKA, worked well with the community by interacting and involving key members for input.
5. Press releases were proactive and helped to get information to those who could not attend nightly briefings.
6. Locally respected and owned salvage organization (Magone Marine) was involved early and used throughout.
7. Eventually, the Unified Command began to accept cultural/traditional knowledge of fisheries information.

Many of the lessons learned described at the Impacts of Oil Spills on Fisheries round-table seemed to focus on how much things had improved since the M/V Kuroshima spill in 1997. The input from state and federal responders, as well as seafood processors, brought to light that there was still a potential to improve efforts in certain areas.

### **What could have been done better (fisheries)?**

1. Supply Alaska DEC training materials in remote areas for processors to have on hand.
2. Increase knowledge of response regulations and how those regulations impact locals.
3. Create a list of contact personnel to call in the case of an oil spill. Perhaps have an on-call, community-based issues committee to represent the whole.
4. Include more locals on beach walks and introduce things to look for, such as oiled animals and tar balls.
5. Get booming done quicker and more effectively. With extreme weather, the Aleutian Islands present a

very difficult situation to deal with an oil spill. Wind and weather need to be considered when booming. Many pictures and video clips showed oil being blown right over booms.

6. Communities such as Unalaska need to prioritize sensitive areas and make contingency plans for equipment needs and storage potential.
7. Need to formalize technical research that will aid processors in preventing contamination.
8. Need to know cargo inventory of passing vessels to be able to determine potential impact.

**Impact of oil spills on communities** — For the community round-table discussion, topics included psychological response to disasters, human health issues, and monitoring of subsistence organisms. Several organizations took part in this discussion, including: Mississippi State University Social Science Research Center, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, Alaska Ocean Observing System, the Qawalangin Tribe, Unalaska Convention and Visitors Bureau, and the Southwest Alaska Municipal Conference.

### **What went well (communities)?**

1. Use of the annual Unalaska health fair to get oil spill contamination and response information out proved to be a wonderful success.
2. Eventually, the environmental unit of the Unified Command began involving local birders to look for oiled birds. Although locals were not trained in oiled-bird capture, they worked well to relay information so those who had the training could extend their scope.
3. By using locals from Unalaska and other communities in the cleanup, other community members were able to get trusted information about the sites.
4. HAZWOPER training was provided on several days and was made available to all who wanted to get involved in the cleanup.

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5. On the whole, the oil spill strengthened relationships between many organizations and the community (i.e., Alaska Maritime National Wildlife Refuge and people of Unalaska).
6. Responsible party was and continues to be responsible for the oil spill.
7. Subsistence science work group working with local biologists and tribes allowed local input and experience to be shared.

### **What could have been done better (communities)?**

1. Need to address concerns about local fishing activities and closed areas. The community was never fully addressed as to where they could and could not go. Misperceptions that areas were “entirely closed” to subsistence fishing confused many. Better/different communication routes might have solved (local Native fishing organizations, ADF&G, TV, radio, newspaper, postings).
2. Need to address locals in plain language that will not turn away interested locals. Many felt overwhelmed and chose not to participate.
3. Need to take into account considerations for differences in Native and non-Native cultural communication.
4. Need to get health/safety information out to subsistence users quickly and accurately. The subsistence science work group worked very hard to collect dosage and contamination information on subsistence foods, but information was not made available to the public.
5. Need to establish baseline data of potentially effected subsistence organisms and explain how and when contamination should no longer be a concern.

### **Look to the Future**

While future oil spills cannot be predicted, we hope that with this publication, we have highlighted some of the considerations

that need to be addressed in terms of the impacts of oil spills on wildlife, fisheries, and communities. We cannot stress enough the importance of prevention and preparedness, but understand that with increased shipping traffic, seasonal extremes in weather, and inconsistencies in communication efforts, we have quite a challenge ahead of us.