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Exxon Oil Spill's Cleanup Crews Share Years of Illness

by Kim Murphy

VALDEZ, Alaska -- The toll of the 1989 Exxon Valdez oil spill is a sadly familiar one: 250,000 dead birds, 2,800 sea otters, 300 harbor seals--all victims of the oil tanker that ran over a reef late one April night and drained 11 million gallons of oil into Prince William Sound.

There are others whom almost no one talks about, although unlike the birds, most of them are still alive. They are the people who scraped oil off the beaches, skimmed it off the top of the water, hosed it off rocks. Workers who stood in the brown foam 18 hours a day, who came back to their sleeping barges with oil matted in their hair, ate sandwiches speckled with oil, steered boats through a brown hydrocarbon haze that looked like the smog from hell.

After that summer, some found oil traces in their lungs, in their blood cells, in the fatty tissue of their buttocks. They got treated for headaches, nausea, chemical burns and breathing problems, and went home. But some never got well. Steve Cruikshank of Wasilla, Alaska, has headaches that go on for days. Two years ago, he was hospitalized when his lungs nearly stopped working. "The doctor said, 'I'm going to give you the strongest antibiotic known to man, and you're either going to survive or not survive. I don't know what's wrong with you.' What's wrong is, I haven't felt right since that oil spill."

John Baker of Kelso, Wash., has had nosebleeds "like gushers" that won't go away and growths in his lungs. "They say generally that people who work in underground mines and stuff get this kind of thing. But the only thing like that I ever worked on was the oil spill."

The lungs of Tim Burt of Seldovia, Alaska, were coated with oil while he was steam-cleaning oil tanks. As his lungs began to fail, he got wrenching headaches. None of the painkillers was strong enough. " 'Just kill me,' he'd say. 'I can't stand the pain anymore,' " recalls his sister, Sandy Elvsaas. Burt died in 1995 of a drug overdose. "He figured he had nothing to lose. He was dead already."

These people all have one thing in common. They were healthy when they arrived in Prince William Sound for a summer of hard work and good pay. They were sick when they left.

"There appear to be hundreds, maybe even thousands, of workers that were affected negatively, probably by their exposure to chemicals used in the cleanup process," said Anchorage attorney Michael Schneider, who is teaming with Westlake Village lawyer Ed Masry to take a new look at the 15,000 workers from all over the world who cleaned up the worst oil disaster in U.S. history.

Although no one has begun to document the number of workers affected, at least two dozen have gone to court with toxic injury claims in recent years. Among workers' compensation cases filed by oil spill workers, 34 claimed poisoning, while 264 claimed respiratory problems and 19 had injuries to the nervous system. About 60 listed petroleum as the source of injury or illness.

Cruikshank and Baker, among others, volunteered information about their health problems in a Times review of dozens of Exxon workers who, according to internal company documents, reported health problems ranging from sore throats to bronchitis and pneumonia during the cleanup. Other cases were obtained from court records and interviews with families.

Lawyers believe the actual number of injuries may be far greater than what has been reported so far. Many, they said, have never associated things like headaches, cancer, rashes, liver and kidney problems to a chemical exposure that happened more than a decade ago.

"Chemical poisoning can cause . . . health problems that manifest as many different symptoms," Los Angeles legal investigator Erin Brockovich said in a letter sent last week to public interest groups in Alaska, urging potential victims to come forward. Brockovich, who works for Masry's law firm, successfully investigated ground-water contamination by Pacific Gas & Electric Co. in the town of Hinkley, Calif., in a case settled in 1996.

Exxon, now ExxonMobil, says the cleanup operation was "remarkably safe" and involved a substance--crude oil--which is of very low toxicity after a few days of weathering. "Years of study of refinery workers and others in the oil industry have demonstrated that crude oil can be worked with safely," the company said. It added that fewer than 25 workers have filed suit for alleged exposures. "Eight of those claims have been dismissed by the courts, and seven have been settled."

Public health officials say there was no sign of a health threat to cleanup workers, though they admit they never had access to data that would have answered the question conclusively. Investigators for the National Institute of Occupational Safety and Health said they were not able to conduct detailed surveys of worker illnesses, and said it was virtually impossible to detect signs of chemical exposure in workers after the cleanup was over. But most of the air samples they took detected only trace amounts of the most dangerous toxins, NIOSH said in its report.

The Valdez cleanup involved strong solvents in addition to the crude oil, which gives off extremely hazardous fumes when it is fresh. Even weathered oil contains some hazardous metals and polycyclic aromatic hydrocarbons, or PAHs, a group of over 100 compounds, some of which can cause cancer. These materials could have entered workers' lungs as a mist or been absorbed through their skin when they hosed down contaminated beaches, some experts say.

But how many suffered health effects may never be known, in part because Exxon and its cleanup contractor, VECO Inc., denied government investigators access to medical records, saying at the time they were too "overwhelmed" to get the data together.

Some of the illness statistics showed up years later, in a confidential document unearthed in court records. It showed that a large number of workers visited clinics with upper-respiratory complaints--a potential warning flag of chemical exposure. Exxon concluded they were a result not of chemical

poisoning but a viral illness--eliminating any obligation to report the cases to the government and set up a long-term health-monitoring program.

"The people in charge of it tried to get the records, and had trouble doing it. And for reasons I don't know, for some reason NIOSH didn't press its authority to get those records," said Mitchell Singal, who was NIOSH's medical officer during the oil spill.

In all, there were 6,722 patient visits for respiratory illness. While some workers may have gone to the clinic more than once, it potentially means that 40% of the work force had respiratory problems severe enough to see a doctor.

John Middaugh, Alaska's state epidemiologist, said the state health department attempted to get viral cultures of sick oil workers from VECO to see if they matched known viruses circulating in the state. But they were only given 17.

VECO officials say they have no recollection now of anyone denying access to medical records. "There wasn't any time our company took a position not to cooperate," said Jamie Slack, vice president for human resources.

Carl Reller, a biochemist who worked as an environmental quality control consultant for the cleanup contractors, sat in on many of the key planning sessions. He said Exxon lobbied successfully to avoid having the spill designated a hazardous waste cleanup, which would have required workers to have 40 hours of training in how to manage the dangerous materials they would be handling. Federal officials concurred that, given the reduced toxicity of the weathered oil, four hours' training was adequate.

"The decision was based on a conservative premise and not revisited," Reller said. "Was this because of legitimate oversight, incompetence, conspiracy, cost cutting or negligence? Based on my experience, I would say all of the above."

NIOSH agreed with Exxon's assessment that a virus was likely responsible for the respiratory problems, which affected not only cleanup workers, but office personnel and even lawyers.

Middaugh agrees. He said federal investigators took exhaustive air and water samples to make sure workers weren't being endangered. "It was concluded there was no risk," he said, "as long as there was meticulous adherence to standards developed by the company and NIOSH and OSHA."

The problem, say many of those studying the worker health issue, is that adherence to safety standards was far from meticulous.

Respirators often weren't available, or workers didn't wear them, which meant dangerous chemicals could be inhaled. Many didn't wear goggles, which allowed chemicals to be absorbed through the eyes. Gloves were often discarded because they didn't fit or got in the way, leaving the skin exposed to absorb toxics.

"Nobody complied with any of the health and safety rules, and everybody turned a blind eye," said Robert J. Gryder, a Coast Guard safety officer at the spill who has worked for decades in the field of hazardous materials handling and training. "They were issuing rain suits [as protective gear], and a rain suit is [worthless] as protective equipment except for one chemical: water."

"In 1989, we did not know what the adverse health effects would be of that exposure to Prudhoe Bay crude oil," Gryder said. "We simply didn't know, and we still don't know."

Ailments Range From Cataracts to Lung Cancer

Phyllis LaJoie had worked for years in Alaska's oil fields, and volunteered to work in Prince William Sound after the spill as a way of paying back. "I felt responsible when the spill happened," she said.

A former seal hunter and construction worker, LaJoie was put in the decontamination unit, where she cleaned oily coats, boots and gloves overnight.

"Of course, we were steaming all that stuff into our lungs," she said.

Later, she cleaned up beaches. "They ran out of equipment like masks, and they told us you could go home, or you could stay and work without it. We ended up with little paper masks."

LaJoie and almost everyone around her had a constant cough and runny nose. She went back to Hawaii, but couldn't seem to shake the illness. "I just kept getting sicker and sicker. Breathing and sinus, stomach, everything."

Finally, she was diagnosed with diabetes, along with emphysema, asthma and an enlarged liver. She has a bacterial overgrowth in her lower intestine.

"My goodness," she said, "this thing has ruined my life."

Randy Lowe, a commercial fisherman from Soldotna, Alaska, contracted his own boat to help collect oil during the cleanup for \$600 a day.

"Oil was everywhere, and every single day, I would get covered with it," he said. "When I got done loading a boom, there'd be a foot of oil in the bottom of my boat, and I'd just shovel it out. You'd drink sodas that had oil on it, you'd smoke a cigarette, it had oil on it, if you ate a sandwich, it had oil on it."

"When I went out there, I was totally, 100% healthy," Lowe said. "Between 1990 and '97 I've been in the hospital 58 times. I've had pancreatitis, liver problems, spleen problems. I had a pancreas attack in '97, I went into septic shock and finally my body shut down. I was in a coma for 52 days, and after that I had to learn all over again how to walk, read and talk."

Lowe figures his medical bills, paid almost entirely by Medicaid, have reached \$1.5 million. And he still is unable to work--too tired, can't concentrate enough.

"I went from making \$55,000, \$60,000 a year to drawing welfare. That was a pretty hard thing to swallow for me," he said. "I'm only 41 years old. I shouldn't be in the shape I'm in."

Jim Reynolds of Hampton, Va., was a mechanic on several oil-skimming boats. He had been working for three months when he woke up covered in a swollen, itchy rash, diagnosed as a reaction to the oil.

"And the thing is, it never really went away. Whenever I get hot or sweaty and irritable, then it comes back."

Stories like these abound. Gryder has seen lung cancer, cataracts, hair loss, hearing loss, skin rashes and respiratory problems among oil spill workers.

Riki Ott, a marine biologist from Cordova, Alaska, who has worked for years to document safety and environmental issues related to the spill, was one of the first to realize that the stories of health problems were similar.

"Back in 1989, I had a number of friends call me and say their son or daughter had come in from the oil spill cleanup on a break and their urine was black," Ott said. "And what concerns me is every year since the spill I have been getting calls from people, and they all have this breathing you can hear, and they all say they're sick, and they say, 'You know, I think it's from the work I did on the oil spill.' "

After talking to more than a dozen such people, Ott began to suspect it was no coincidence that all of them were sick. She flew to Texas to meet with Dr. William Rea, who had treated many former cleanup workers and believed many of them were suffering the cumulative effects of chemical exposure to oil and solvents. Eventually, Ott contacted Masry and Schneider and persuaded them to try to find more injured workers and file lawsuits on their behalf.

Few of the previous lawsuits filed against Exxon ever went anywhere, including suits filed by LaJoie and Lowe, which were dismissed before going to trial. Experts like Rea were countered by medical experts put forward by Exxon, who said workers suffered no significant medical damage, or if they did, it could have come from anything.

In the only case that approached trial--involving GarryStubblefield, a crane operator who was exposed to diesel fumes and heavy oil mist during the cleanup--Exxon negotiated a secret settlement for a reported \$2 million.

Stubblefield hasn't worked since. He gasps when he breathes, gets spasms when he is exposed to perfume, cigarette smoke, truck exhaust. "He'll never breathe right again. Never," said his former wife, Melissa Stubblefield. "If he even starts to laugh, he gets to coughing so he gasps for air."

All Safety Procedures Followed, Exxon Says

Most health officials remain unconvinced that the cleanup left anyone sick.

"Right after the spill occurred, there was a tremendous focus on the potential toxicity of the oil. There was a question that if the oil contained substances that could potentially harm workers on a long-term basis, or on a severe short-term basis, and induce sterility or cancer or birth defects, then it would be unethical to undertake cleanup at all," recalled Middaugh, the state epidemiologist.

"But in a very short period of time, all of the parties, NIOSH, the American Federation of Labor, OSHA, all looked at it and said, this oil has not been refined, it's naturally occurring crude oil, and under proper conditions of worker safety, of injury prevention, with personal protective equipment, training and oversight, there should be no component of the oil that should provide any toxicity that would induce any of these long-term problems," he said.

Singal also doubts there were long-term health threats. "Most of the illnesses were, as far as we could determine at the time . . . associated with living in close quarters," he said.

"We kept hearing about chronic effects later on. I couldn't think of any reason why it would have been related to the cleanup activity. But I can't say one way or another, because we never looked into it."

In Exxon's view, one of the most important stories of the cleanup is what didn't happen: the workers in heavy gear who didn't fall into the water and drown, who didn't suffer hypothermia or get injured by heavy equipment.

"Safety was the No. 1 concern. We took all the proper safety procedures to protect workers," said company spokesman Tom Cirigliano. "We have paid more than \$300 million to more than 11,000 Alaskans and to others who were directly affected by the spill. This is not a company that by any sense of the imagination ran and hid."

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