

Prince William Sound Regional Citizens' Advisory Council
Citizens promoting environmentally safe operation of the Alyeska terminal and associated tankers.

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ConocoPhillips under scrutiny for tanker spills

As the Observer went to press, Alaska's biggest oil producer and shipper was under investigation by state and federal agencies for possible unreported spills and other violations on three of its tankers in the North Slope crude oil trade.

John Devens, executive director of the citizens' council, was briefed on the investigations last month by Bob Lindsay, president of ConocoPhillips' shipping subsidiary, Polar Tankers. The briefing came at Devens' request after rumors of the incidents reached the council.

According to Devens' briefing from Lindsay, the incidents were as follows:

- The Coast Guard issued a letter of warning to the company for failure to report a March 16, 2004, spill of bunker fuel to the deck of the tanker Polar Endeavour.
- A federal criminal investigation is under way for a spill to deck that took place on January 16, 2004, on the Polar Discovery. Content from the engine room sludge tank was allegedly pumped through the Discovery's piping system to the deck slop tank. A drain line had been inadvertently left open and oily water escaped to the deck, with an unknown amount reaching the water. The incident was not reported to the Coast Guard as required by regulation or within the company as required by internal policies.
- A second criminal investigation is under way for the alleged intentional bypassing of the oily water separator on the Polar Alaska. This device is used to clean bilge or ballast water before it is discharged overboard.

The Environmental Crimes Unit of the state Department of Environmental Conservation is investigating the incidents, according to Leslie Pearson, a spill response manager for the agency. She said the Environmental Crimes Unit is working with the state Department of Law, which is coordinating with the U.S. Justice Department.

In a written statement, ConocoPhillips told the Observer that its management "voluntarily reported these events to the authorities, and the company has been cooperative and will continue to cooperate fully with the appropriate authorities." ConocoPhillips also said it had conducted or was conducting its own investigations, but wouldn't comment farther.

"It appears Polar definitely had some operational problems on board the vessels that management was unaware of," Devens said. "But it also appears company officials took appropriate action when they found out about it, so we're hopeful they'll get these problems under control before they lead to a bigger incident."

Lindsay and Antonio Valdes, general manager of ConocoPhillips Marine, were

scheduled to discuss the incidents at the September board meeting of the citizens' council.

At Observer press time, it did not appear that any of the incidents under investigation occurred in 2003. ConocoPhillips was one of four companies that received Legacy Awards for operating without any spills in 2003, based in part on nominations by the citizens' council. (See "Legacy Awards" story.)

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