



Bulletin No. 6
May 5, 1989
Oil Spill Public Health Advice

The Alaska Department of Labor (DOL) has determined that a recently issued federal regulation regarding hazardous waste operations technically encompassed the Exxon Valdez oil spill because all petroleum spills are covered by this section of the law.

These regulations specify that certain steps are to be followed to protect workers involved in hazardous waste cleanup operations. Applied to this oil spill, they will assure prompt review of all potential hazards and assign high priority to agency coordination, review of health concerns, appropriate worker training, and use of protective measures for workers involved in cleanup activities. Under leadership of the state DOL these steps are underway.

Because of the designation by the Alaska DOL that the cleanup is a hazardous waste operation, the Alaska Division of Public Health (ADPH) has initiated a review of all aspects of human health impacts as they relate to the potential toxicity of the oil. The ADPH has consulted with numerous experts, and state, federal and local agencies regarding the toxicity of the oil in order to provide the best available advice to all Alaskans, including workers, residents, tourists, and others.

Potential adverse health effects from exposure to the oil depend on the type of exposure. These risks to human health are generally low, particularly at this time. Exposure can occur from skin contact, ingestion, or inhalation.

Major concerns now are focusing on potential health impacts from skin contamination and accidental ingestion, and on the potential impact on the food chain. Except for people who may be exposed to fumes in closed spaces while involved in cleanup activities, there is no risk of adverse health effects from breathing air near spilled oil.

Risks are greatest to workers heavily exposed to oil during some cleanup activities, but the risks to these workers is considered to be low. With appropriate training and personal protective equipment, as required by the hazardous waste regulations, cleanup activities can continue and workers can be confident that their health will not be compromised.

For persons who are not frequently exposed to oil while engaged in cleanup, the risk is negligible. Prolonged contact with oil may cause some people to develop a skin rash.

ADPH RECOMMENDS THE FOLLOWING PRUDENT AND SIMPLE MEASURES

- Avoid direct skin contact with the oil.
- If you get oil or tar balls on your skin, wash it off with soap and water.
- Take reasonable precautions to avoid accidental ingestion (wash hands before eating).
- If you get oil on clothing, wash it in the usual way.
- There is no need to use harsh detergents, solvents or other chemicals to wash oil from skin or clothing and their use is discouraged.
- Don't burn debris (for example, soiled waste or driftwood) contaminated with oil.

POTENTIAL IMPACT ON THE FOOD CHAIN

1. Great concern exists about the potential impact of the oil upon fish and other seafood. The best tests available at this time are the smell and taste of the fish. If the fish smell or taste of petroleum, they should not be eaten. If they don't, it is almost certainly safe to eat. It is probable that living clams, mussels, and shellfish from intertidal areas are also safe, if the same standards are applied.
2. Based on all information provided by experts and agencies to date, at this time we know of no constituents of the oil that are known or suspected to accumulate in fish that might result in human illness or disease from eating the fish.
3. We are unable to provide absolute assurances at this time and are working to have better information as our highest priority. As more information becomes available, we will provide additional reports.