



alaska report

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Happy 50th birthday, Alaska! *How will you look at 100?*

-- by Pamela Brodie, Alaska Chapter Chair



Alaska became our nation's 49th state on January 3, 1959. As Alaskans celebrate this year our fiftieth anniversary of statehood, it's an appropriate time to look ahead to what the Great Land might look like fifty years from now -- and what influence we all might have on that future.

I don't expect to live to see that day, because I'm old enough to remember predictions for America fifty years ago. I remember that the most respected futurists of the time were hired (I am not making this up) by Walt Disney to design Tomorrow Land, part of Disneyland. And what was our life to be like now, according to these sages? I clearly remember the vision that girls like me would grow up to be

happy housewives in aprons in the all electric kitchens of our all electric homes, waiting for hubby to drive home in his all electric car -- all powered by "clean, safe, nearly free nuclear power." The main "problem" these futurists foresaw was that advances in productivity would lead to a twenty hour work week, and a possible resulting problem of "too much leisure time." Ah well. As interesting as what *was* predicted is what *was not* -- home computers and the world wide web, for example. In fact, when home computers came on the market about twenty-five years ago, the universal (and unanswered) question was, "*why would anybody want one?*" It's surprising that most people missed things that should have been obvious, such as that when we baby boomers grew up and wanted our own homes, the price of desirable real estate would skyrocket, that we would use up natural resources, and that pollution would accumulate.

Remembering what a poor job the futurists did is humbling -- but it also provides some reason to hope, because there is no getting around the fact that right now the future isn't looking too good, for Alaska or for the world. Global warming and related ocean acidification are already affecting Alaska, with frightening implications. Over the last 40 years, average Alaska temperatures have increased 4-5 degrees, almost all of it in winter, with those temperatures up 8-10 degrees. I've seen a considerable difference in my 20 years here. There's been ample publicity about melting sea ice and its threat to polar bears (walrus and ribbon seals are threatened for the same reason). Alaskans are seeing our rivers warming -- the Yukon River has recently warmed 10 degrees, and in time some rivers could dry up in late summer if glaciers are lost. If this warming and acidification

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can't be stopped, our existing salmon populations will be very adversely affected, as river temperatures increasingly exceed spawning and migration thresholds, and food sources decline. Getting the least attention but perhaps the most devastating over the next fifty years may be the impact of ocean acidification on the bottom of the food chain, leading to dramatic declines of fish, seal, and whale populations.

Alaska has more coastline than the other 49 states combined, and in the west and north, the land is low and flat enough that meaningful areas would be inundated. These areas are sparsely populated, but the impacts would be devastating for the coastal Native villages as well as for coastal wildlife. Three of Alaska's four major cities are coastal, and just a few feet of rise in sea level would inundate the stretch of road that connects the Kenai Peninsula (including my home town of Homer) to Anchorage and the rest of the country's road system. Meanwhile, as the southwestern U.S. becomes both hotter and dryer, Americans are likely to move north, into both Canada and Alaska.

Global warming will have significant impacts on Alaska's forests, resulting in greater yellow cedar and boreal forest tree death and more record-breaking fires. Substantially increased tundra fires are likely to destroy needed forage for caribou and muskoxen. Migrating birds are particularly vulnerable, as essential wetlands along the flyways could dry up, and melting permafrost will lead to loss of wetlands in the great boreal breeding areas. Loss of permafrost is permanent -- at least until the next ice age. It's a bleak prospect -- but nothing in the future is certain, least of all technology -- as you might notice by your non-electric cars and home heating.

The most important way to protect Alaska is the same as the best way to protect Earth -- to keep them cool and wet. But most Americans don't even put Global Warming near the top of our *environmental* problems, much less our national problems. Fortunately, we no longer need to try to persuade the President. But to get our country to make the necessary effort, we need to educate and persuade our neighbors, as well as our members of Congress. *Thank you for your help.*

Curbing Global Warming will be a tall order -- and it is by no means our only challenge. We need constant vigilance to protect our temperate rain forest from roads and logging, our salmon streams from pollution by giant industrial mines, our Arctic and off-shore habitat from the dangers of oil drilling. If we can succeed, the cities and transportation systems of the future will be far different and far more energy efficient. And I hope that our children and their children can enjoy an Alaska that is otherwise very much as it has been for millenia, with abundant and diverse fish and wildlife populations, towering forests, magnificent glaciers and vast expanses of wilderness. ♦

Chapter volunteer wins conservation award

In 2008, the Alaska Conservation Foundation presented Sierra Club Alaska Chapter volunteer leader Andrew Keller with its Celia Hunter Award for Outstanding Volunteer Contributions.

According to ACF, "This award recognizes significant, long-term efforts as a leader in the grassroots, volunteer environmental movement in Alaska. Appropriate candidates are active on a state or nationwide level, are ardent conservation supporters, and have made a difference for Alaska's conservation movement over many years."

Andy's from Fairbanks, and ACF awarded his more than three decades of work to protect Alaska's wild lands. This effort included 30 trips to Washington, DC and many organizing or media trips of up to a month in a dozen states, primarily in support of the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge, but also the Tongass National Forest and more. Andy has made saving these places a lifetime priority. In 1991 he directed the Minnesota congressional delegation's co-sponsorship of Arctic Refuge wilderness bills.

As part of this honor, Andy was able to make a grant to any conservation group of his choice, and he chose the Sierra Club Alaska Chapter, with a gift of \$300. Many thanks, Andy, for choosing the Sierra Club for your gift, and congratulations on your award! ♦

--Pamela Brodie, Alaska Chapter chair



Fred Paillet

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Update:

Izembek Wilderness Road controversy enters new stage

On March 30, President Barack Obama signed into law the Omnibus Public Lands Management Act of 2009. The bill designated wilderness areas totaling more than 2 million acres in nine states, not including Alaska, and more than 1,000 miles of wild & scenic rivers; it codified the National Landscape Conservation System. And these are only the highlights.

Congress didn't entirely overlook the 49th State in this massive bill. In an unfortunate move, it included a proposed land exchange sponsored by Sen. Lisa Murkowski (R-AK) and former Sen. Ted Stevens (R-AK), designed to push a road across the designated wilderness in the Izembek National Wildlife Refuge in Southwest Alaska. For more than a decade, **alaska report** (Feb 09, Sep and Jun 08, Dec 07, Dec and Sep 03, Dec, Sep and May 01, Nov and Jan 99, Oct 98, Sep 97) has extensively covered this controversy and the Sierra Club's strong opposition to this proposed road because of the damage to refuge wilderness and wildlife resources and the dangerous precedent for the future of the National Wilderness Preservation System.

The challenge for the Administration will be to find a solution that accomodates King Cove's transportation needs and preserves the integrity of the Izembek Wilderness.

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service describes the wildlife resources of this world-class refuge: "Izembek National Wildlife Refuge surrounds and protects the watershed of several large lagoons, including the 30-mile long by 5-mile wide Izembek Lagoon. These lagoons provide food and shelter for an extraordinary abundance and diversity of avian migrants, as well as other marine and coastal wildlife species. Approximately 130,000 Pacific black brant, 62,000 emperor geese, 50,000 Taverner's Canada geese, 300,000 ducks, and 80,000 shorebirds stop over in the Izembek area during migration and as many as 50,000 Steller's eiders winter in the area."

As introduced, the Murkowski-Stevens bill called for a swap of 43,000 acres of state land and 18,000 acres of King Cove Native Corporation lands for about 206 acres of refuge wilderness land the State and the Native corporation want for a state road corridor across the refuge. The road would connect the community of King Cove on the south side of the Alaska Peninsula with the community of Cold Bay on the north side. Currently, a fast ocean-going hovercraft moves people and goods between the two hamlets.

While the Aleuts of King Cove and the East Aleutian

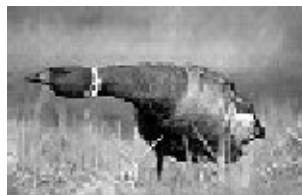
Borough (estimated 2,695 borough residents in 2004) support the road, the Association of Village Council Presidents of the Yukon-Kuskokwim Delta, representing 56 villages with about 6,000 mostly Yupik Eskimo residents, opposes an Izembek road. They fear that road traffic would harm the geese and other waterfowl the villagers of the Delta depend upon as part of their subsistence economy.

Last year in the House Natural Resources Committee (27 Democrats, 22 Republicans), Chairman Nick Rahall opposed the companion bill by ranking minority member (and former chairman) Rep. Don Young (R-AK). But lacking the votes to kill it, Rahall let the bill go by voice vote to the full House.

In the evenly divided Senate Energy and Natural Resources Committee chaired by Sen. Jeff Bingaman (D-NM) and with Sen. Bernard Sanders (I-VT) regularly voting with the Democrats, the bill was stalled until the Committee accepted the recommendation of the Office of Management and Budget to require an environmental impact statement as the basis for the Secretary of the Interior to either approve or reject the land trade. With the stand-off broken, the revised bill was added to the Senate's omnibus public lands bill that the House ultimately accepted unchanged.

In enacting the land exchange bill, Congress handed off the decision on the exchange and the road to Interior Secretary Ken Salazar--and the White House. Under the Alaska National Interest Lands Conservation Act (ANILCA), Congress approves or disapproves proposed Alaska land exchanges involving wilderness area acreage.

The forthcoming environmental impact statement will examine other alternatives to the road, such as a ferry, year-round helicopter service for emergency medical evacuations from King Cove, and subsidizing the hovercraft's operation and maintenance costs that the villagers say they cannot afford. Reliable, all-weather "medivac" capability is King Cove's rationale for the road. Congress provided the hovercraft in an earlier #38 million benefits package for King Cove designed to lay the road controversy to rest. At last count the hovercraft has made 28 medivac trips. The challenge for the Administration will be to find a solution that accommodates King Cove's transportation needs and preserves the integrity of the Izembek Wilderness.



Black brant are regular Izembek visitors.

When the DEIS is issued, Sierra Club activists will be urging the Administration to choose the option that is clearly in the national interest--a King Cove-Cold Bay transportation link that leaves the Izembek Wilderness--and the Wilderness Act--intact. ♦

-- Jack Hession

Alaska offshore drilling makes headline news

Salazar in Alaska to review future plans

Secretary of the Interior Ken Salazar was in Anchorage and Dillingham April 13 and 14 to hear from Alaskans on the future of offshore energy in Alaska.

Just before leaving office in January, the Bush administration pushed through a new five-year leasing plan for offshore development off Alaska's coasts that would include lease sales in Bristol Bay and the Beaufort and Chukchi seas. (See **alaska report**, Mar 08, May 07, Oct & Mar 06)

When President Barack Obama came into office, his new Interior Secretary Salazar put these plans on hold and called for more public input. He announced a series of four public hearings for the first half of April around the nation's coasts—east, south, north, and west—Atlantic City, NJ; New Orleans, LA; Anchorage, AK; and San Francisco, CA.

Mr. Salazar, who attended all four hearings, began his trip to Alaska with a visit to the Bristol Bay community of Dillingham, where he spent a little over two hours. His objective was to hear concerns about offshore oil development in federal waters in Bristol Bay, and the people of this region were more than happy to share. During the meeting, Salazar asked for a show of hands of those opposed to OCS (Outer Continental Shelf) development, and the vast majority in attendance sent their arms skyward.

In Anchorage, on April 14, at the Dena'ina Civic Auditorium & Convention Center, Secretary Salazar opened the meeting with remarks and a presentation of the recently released report on OCS resources in the U.S. He was followed by statements from Governor Sarah Palin,



North Slope Borough mayor Edward Itta testifies at Anchorage OCS hearing.

Senators Lisa Murkowski and Mark Begich, and Rep. Don Young, and several members of the state legislature and Native leaders. Then the meeting was opened to the public to speak

for three minutes each. More than 500 people showed up to testify; these included elected officials, Natives, oil workers, fishermen, Sierra Club volunteers and other conservation groups.

As expected, all of Alaska's elected officials testified in favor of more drilling, as did oil industry executives and other industry representatives. Many Alaska Natives and fishermen spoke passionately about concerns over impacts of expanded drilling and asked the Administration to put the brakes on development plans offshore.

As Sierra Club representative I testified that the Bush administration had aggressively pushed this new plan without gathering the adequate scientific studies and analysis necessary to understand the ecosystems and to anticipate the potential consequences of development on both marine wildlife and the coastal communities.

At the lunch break conservation groups held barbeque at noon, serving about 65-pounds of Bristol Bay salmon in Anchorage's Town Square to remind folks what is at risk if this plan moves forward.

Secretary Salazar didn't signal what exactly the Obama administration's plans are, but talked about three goals that will guide the offshore energy plan: addressing climate change, increasing national security by reducing spending on overseas oil, and creating economic opportunities. He did say that the president's energy plan will emphasize renewable energy.

The Chukchi and Beaufort Seas, America's share of the Arctic Ocean, together with the Northern Bering Sea, make up one of the most abundant marine ecosystems in the world. This region is the lifeblood of Alaska Native coastal communities, whose residents have relied on the sea for cultural and nutritional subsistence for thousands of years. Climate change is now putting immense pressure on this unique area and its wildlife.

⇒ **WHAT YOU CAN DO:** Submit a written statement during the public comment period, which ends **September 21, 2009**. For more information on how to submit a comment please visit: <http://www.mms.gov/5-year/2010-2015DPPComments.htm>.

Mail written comments on the Draft Proposed Program to:
Ms. Renee Orr; Chief, Leasing Division
Minerals Management Service, MS 4010
381 Elden Street
Herndon, VA 20170-4817

Court ruling halts offshore drilling programs

Just a few days after the Interior Department hearing in Anchorage, a federal appeals court in

Washington DC threw out the old Bush Administration oil and gas leasing program. The court decision said the plan did not properly study the environmental impact of expanding oil and gas drilling off the Alaska coast.

The Bush Administration's five-year plan through June 2012 allowed lease sales in the Beaufort, Bering and Chukchi Seas off Alaska, including one sale in the Chukchi held last year after the suit was filed. The appeals court said that plans to allow drilling in the current program were approved without adequate review of the environmental effects. Still in doubt is what effect the new ruling will have on those previous leases already sold.

But for now this decision is an extremely positive development for the sensitive marine ecosystems of the Arctic Ocean and Bristol Bay. It will require the Interior Department to redo the plan undertaken by the Bush Administration. Right away, the decision takes five planned lease sales (1 in Bristol Bay and 2 each in the Beaufort and Chukchi Seas) off the table for now until a revised plan is developed with adequate science!

The Court affirmed what we have been saying since 2007 when the leasing plan was put in place-- that the Bush Interior Dept took an irrational approach in not analyzing the environmental sensitivity of the offshore areas in the Beaufort, Chukchi and Bearing Seas when it included them in the five-year plan. ♦

-- Trish Rolfe

Editor's note: The sensitive marine wildlife off Alaska's coasts were not forgotten during the hearings in Atlantic City, New Orleans, and San Francisco. Speakers frequently reminded the Interior Department that Americans everywhere care about Alaska. Polar bears in San Francisco made the point, and Trip Van Noppen, president of Earthjustice, emphasized, "The Arctic Ocean is ground zero for this...(Drilling) leases have already taken place in the Arctic. There's been no moratorium over the last few years in the Bering Sea like there has been on the East and West coasts."



At the San Francisco hearing April 16, polar bear support is strong for safe, clean energy now!

photo: Vicky Hoover

Book Notes:

Earth under Fire How Global Warming Is Changing the World; written and photographed by Gary Braasch, with an afterword by Bill McKibben

"The power of Gary Braasch's personal witness to the climate crisis makes this essential reading for every citizen." — Al Gore

Environmental photojournalist Gary Braasch brings to life, through vivid pictures and compelling narrative, his extraordinary 8-year journey around the world to document changes already underway to people, communities and ecosystems. In ***EARTH UNDER FIRE: How Global Warming is Changing the World, Updated Edition***, he brings us along to witness firsthand what he discovered beyond the Antarctic and Arctic Circles, above 15,000 feet in the Andes, on damaged coral reefs, and in communities on the front lines of climate disruption. Deeply researched and scientifically accurate, it offers an upbeat and intelligent account of how we can lessen the effects of our near-total dependence on fossil fuels using technologies and energy sources already available. A thorough updating and a new preface for the paperback edition bring the compelling facts about climate change up to the beginning of the new U.S. administration.

Featuring more than one hundred photographs — including dramatic before-and-after comparisons — *EARTH UNDER FIRE* records species, cultures, and entire ecosystems at risk due to receding glaciers, eroding coastlines, rising sea levels, and thawing permafrost. Braasch's powerful, eye-opening images show glacial retreat from the Alps to the Andes, coastal erosion threatening native villages from Alaska to Bangladesh, and other direct evidence that global warming is happening right now. The book contains contributions by leading scientists including Alton Byers, Sylvia Earle, Paul Epstein, Peter Gleick, Thomas Lovejoy, Jonathan Overpeck, and Stephen Schneider. (From the Epilog by Gary Braasch): "Let me state the goal clearly: No policy should be promulgated, no program initiated, no alliance sealed, no purchase made, no machine designed or built, no land use permitted, no product introduced, no law passed, no politician elected unless the action is a step forward to reduction and reversal of the effect of greenhouse gases."

Some comments: "Braasch's descriptions and photographs of how climate change is unraveling ecosystems and human lives make real and vivid what for too many remains speculative and abstract." —Amory B. Lovins, Rocky Mountain Institute.

"There are scant books equal to the task of spelling out the greatest challenge in human history-global climate change. Rarer still is an author who can both write and photograph it, seamlessly marrying text and images. *Earth under Fire* is that rare book."—Paul Hawken, author of *Blessed Unrest* and *The Ecology of Commerce*.

University of California Press: Contact: Caitlin O'Hara, Publicist; (510) 642-1302, caitlin.ohara@ucpress.edu ♦

The Good, Bad, and Ugly on the Tongass

Three Bills in 111th Congress

The good is that a bill reinstating the national Roadless Area Conservation rule, with the Tongass National Forest included in it, is poised to move ahead in Congress. Sen. Maria Cantwell (D-WA) and Rep. Jay Inslee (D-WA1) are likely to introduce the bill in both houses of Congress

photo: Mark Rorick



View from entrance of Hoonah Sound into Chatham Strait where many roadless areas are on the Forest Service's chopping block

by early summer. First introduced during the Bush era, this bill has had support from more than 150 co-sponsors in the past, (see **alaska report**, Jun 03) and there could be many more this Congress. The original roadless

rule was enacted during the Clinton administration through a public process that had more than four million American citizens actively supporting the rule at public meetings and through written comments. The rule prohibits road building for logging in the remaining roadless areas of our national forests. During the Bush administration, government support for the rule went away. When an anti-environment Montana judge struck down the rule, the federal government did not lift a finger. The Bush administration could have gone forward with a new public process to deal with the bad court decision but deliberately did not.

It is in the Tongass, our largest national forest, that the most and best of the nation's roadless areas still remain. Timber cutting on the Tongass is so non-economic that stopping the building of taxpayer subsidized roads in these areas will protect these wonderful places from the devastating clear cutting that has been the norm on the Tongass for the last six decades.

Sealaska Land Exchange bill

The bad and ugly are two bills being introduced in Congress by Alaska's senators, Lisa Murkowski and newly elected Mark Begich. The first is the ongoing Sealaska Land Exchange bill (**alaska report** Feb 2009). Sealaska is a regional Alaska Native Corporation. Under the 1971 Alaska Native Claims Settlement Act (ANCSA), Sealaska was entitled to select lands from the Tongass National Forest for its corporate use. The lands to be selected are restricted to specific areas designated for selection in ANCSA. Alaska's Native entities, including Sealaska, agreed to this when the bill was passed.

Sealaska has not completed its land selections and is still entitled to select about 70,000 acres within the specified areas.

The problem for Sealaska is that they have already selected and clearcut hundreds of thousands of acres of the best and most economic acreage available to them and what is left for selection is not good enough for them. The already selected areas have been devastated by Sealaska's logging practices, which, because Sealaska is a private entity, do not need to comply with federal standards and guidelines for wildlife protection.

The land exchange bill would allow Sealaska to select more of the best from forest areas not allocated to them under ANCSA, in exchange for giving up selection rights to lands where they may now, by law, make selections. Sealaska is also looking to select certain lands for "no logging" uses. These areas are called "future sites" and are many of the best coves and valleys on the Tongass. Sealaska could then use them for tourism development; their selection would preclude other tourism and hunter guide businesses from continuing to use these areas.

Timber Industry Retooling Act

The second of the bad and ugly is the new "South east Alaska Timber Industry Retooling and Restructuring Act". This bill would provide \$40 million in grants for retooling Tongass "sawmills, logging companies and road construction companies involved in timber work", "to improve or alter the business and practices of the eligible entity to allow the eligible entity to become more competitive within the timber industry; or to shift to a type of business that is not related to the timber industry". The good component of this bill is that the grants could be used to shift a mill to a more environmentally friendly business practice. But it is unlikely that ongoing mills would want to or be able to do such a change. The \$40 million in grants would be used to ramp up the Tongass timber industry. The bill does not require

mills which would get grants to stop cutting old-growth tree stands. The grants could also be used to fund a biomass to energy industry on the Tongass. Sealaska Timber Corporation



Sealaska's logging practices

photo: Jim Matkoviyak

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A shot across the bow of Healy Coal

The saga of the controversial Healy coal-fired power plant, situated very close to Denali National Park, continues. In January, the Healy Coal Plant #2, shut down since 2000, was subject of an agreement for its sale to Golden Valley Electric Association, (GVEA) in order to start it up again. (see **alaska report**, Feb 2009) . Such a start up, with an expectation of polluted air over Denali, flies in the face of the Sierra Club's priority efforts to prevent new coal-fired power plants.

Recently, in late April, Trustees for Alaska and the Sierra Club Environmental Law Program sent a warning letter to GVEA. cautioning GVEA to comply with the Prevention of Significant Deterioration (PSD) provisions of the Clean

Tongass good, bad, ugly

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has stated publicly that they would like to use the

grants, in partnership with the Tongass's largest timber mill, Viking Lumber Company, to produce biomass plants. This is seen by both Sealaska and Viking as a way to make



photo: Larry Edwards

Viking Lumber Company's mill on Prince of Wales Island has done more harm to the Tongass Forest over the last decade than all the other mills combined

logging more profitable by having a use for the parts of trees that can not be used as lumber.

The Southeast Alaska Timber Industry Retooling and Restructuring Act states that the bill will make the Tongass timber industry more competitive. The industry is far from being competitive that America's taxpayers have been paying on average, over the last six years, more than \$300,000 to support every direct timber job. In 2008 they subsidized the industry by \$600,000 for every job. The bill's effort to make logging more economic would be only a drop in the bucket, and taxpayers will still pay huge amounts of money to harm the forests.

This bill would not be a problem if the companies getting retooling grants would be required to change their business practices to forest restoration. ♦

-- by Mark Rorick, Chair, Juneau Group

➔ WHAT YOU CAN DO:

Ask your member of Congress to become an original cosponsor of Rep. Inslee's Roadless Area Conservation rule bill before it is introduced; call the Capitol switchboard at (202)224-3121.

Air Act before beginning operations at Healy Coal Plant #2. The letter, sent on behalf of Sierra Club Alaska Chapter, Alaska Center for the Environment, Northern Alaska Environmental Center, Denali Citizens Council, HEA Members Forum, and MEA Ratepayers Alliance, implies that failure to comply with these Clean Air Act provisions could lead to a lawsuit..

In January, GVEA, Alaska Industrial Development and Export Authority (AIDEA) and Homer Electric Association (HEA) had announced a business agreement that requires GVEA to purchase the plant for \$50 million through a loan from AIDEA. In addition, AIDEA will provide up to a \$45 million line of credit to GVEA covering restart costs, which includes plant upgrades and the acquisition of federal air pollution and other permits. HEA has agreed to purchase up to 50 percent of Healy Coal Plant #2 power for the life of the project to spread the risk for GVEA. Under this deal, GVEA would acquire a valuable asset from the state corporation (AIDEA) it has fought in court for a decade, and HEA rate payers will shoulder the risks and costs without obtaining a power generation asset.

The Clean Air Act forbids any person from constructing or modifying a major source of air pollution without first securing a PSD permit ensuring that the source's emissions will be limited and not violate air quality standards. EPA guidelines require PSD review when the shut down is considered permanent. The letter argues that the plant was in a state of permanent shut down. If Golden Valley Electric's attorneys respond by alleging they don't have to comply with PSD requirements and if EPA steps in and tell them they must comply, a lawsuit could result. The hope is that the economics of additional permitting requirements will cause them to back out of the deal, thus precluding startup of the controversial facility.



Healy Coal Plants #1 and 2; #1 is an operating plant using coal to generate electric power; it is connected to and shares a control room with the controversial plant #2

The Healy Coal Plant sits on the boundary of Denali National Park, a Class I air shed--which receives maximum protection under the Clean Air Act. The only way to prevent illegal damage to the surrounding

environment is for this plant to remain permanently shut down. Stay tuned for **alaska report** updates on the Healy Coal Plant #2 campaign. ♦

-- Chris Hall, Coal Campaign-Alaska

Exxon Valdez Oil Spill Disaster, Twenty Years Later

This is a time of anniversaries and remembrances in Alaska. On January 3, we celebrated fifty years since statehood; on March 24, we mourned the twentieth anniversary of the day the *Exxon Valdez* oil tanker hit Bligh Reef in Prince William Sound. The tanker spilled 11 million gallons of crude oil that eventually contaminated more than a thousand miles of shoreline along the western Gulf of Alaska, bringing an oily death to untold thousands of birds and animals.

It's a time of anniversary for me too, because in March, 1989, on the spring equinox, four days before the oil spill, I drove my pick-up off the ferry at Haines, Alaska, moving to Alaska from Sacramento, California. I had hoped for a peaceful respite from ten years of intense environmental and political work in several other states. Instead I stepped into a tornado of mostly chaotic and pathetic human response to environmental catastrophe. Strange as it may seem, I am grateful that fate brought me here at that strange moment.

Alaska is a different place now, because of the oil spill. Most beaches and most wildlife populations have recovered remarkably well, although some have not. The

attitude of Alaskans towards the oil industry has changed markedly, showing a considerable loss of trust, especially because of Exxon's choice to fight (largely successfully) the punitive damages originally awarded to the fishermen and other private plaintiffs injured by the spill. (See **alaska report**, Sept 2008) But in a strange irony, the oil spill -- thanks to a major grassroots effort -- led to the protection of much of coastal Alaska. Nearly \$400 million of Exxon's billion dollar settlement to the State and Federal governments (a separate lawsuit from that of the private plaintiffs) has been spent to purchase land and conservation easements for nearly 650,000 acres of fish and wildlife habitat in the oil spill region. This land, which would have been subject to logging and subdivision, is now protected in perpetuity in state and federal parks, refuges and forests.

I feel very fortunate, as Sierra Club staff from 1990 to 1996, and working within the Alaska Rainforest Campaign, to have been able to lead the grassroots effort to persuade the Exxon Valdez Trustee Council to use much of the spill fine to acquire and protect key habitat lands and the fish and animals that depend on them. ♦

-- Pamela Brodie, Alaska Chapter Chair

alaska report

alaska report is the newsletter of the Sierra Club Alaska Task Force, encouraging advocacy on Alaska federal lands issues, particularly as they pertain to the passage and implementation of the Alaska National Interest Lands Conservation Act of 1980.

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ACTION NEEDED!

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