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Cordovans scrutinize protection plans for Copper River

THE TIMES STAFF

June 12, 2008 at 2:13PM AKST

Working to prevent the next Exxon Valdez before it happens, a group of Cordova residents were scheduled to put the oil spill contingency plan for the Trans-Alaska Pipeline on trial on June 9-12 in Anchorage.

“The incredible Copper River is pristine, but there is high risk of spills from the aging, corroding Trans-Alaska pipeline for over 170 miles in the watershed, with several major river crossings,” said Gabriel Scott, Cascadia’s Alaska field representative in Cordova, who is representing requestors at the hearing.

“The pipeline snakes through over 170 miles in our watershed, with several major river crossings. We can prove Alyeska is leaving critical containment gaps at the Gulkana, Tazlina and Klutina rivers. The contingency plan is a paperwork shuffle, and the regulators have hidden behind closed doors. It’s time for a reality check.”

“The question of the next spill is not if, but when,” said Dune Lankard, a commercial fisherman and Eyak native.

“And this time, will we be ready? The state hasn’t given the Copper River the priority it deserves. We know from experience complacency breeds disaster. We won’t let that happen. Not again.”

At issue is whether the Copper River needs to be protected as an “environmentally sensitive area or area of public

concern” under existing regulations, something Alyeska and the Alaska Division of Spill Prevention deny.

Requestors call the designation a “no-brainer” for one of the world’s great rivers and are asking the state to require more stringent spill prevention and preparedness measures.

“Instead of planning to ‘clean up’ spills after the fact, Alyeska can and must keep enough workers and equipment on hand to keep any spilled oil out of these key rivers to begin with,” Scott said. “They can afford to do it right.”

Called an adjudicatory hearing, Cascadia Wildlands Project v. Alaska Division of Spill Prevention was set up to allow presentation of evidence and witnesses on both sides.

Requestors are Cordova fisherman Bill Black, Alaska Glacial Mud Co. owner/founder Lauren Padawer, Cordovan Gabriel Scott and the conservation organization Cascadia Wildlands Project.

Witnesses were scheduled to testify Monday and Tuesday, including Alaska fisheries expert James Brady, Alaska Department of Fish and Game’s managing biologist in Prince William Sound during the Exxon Valdez spill; Kristin Smith of Copper River Watershed Project; Lankard, and representatives from the Ahtna villages of Gulkana, Gakona, Kluti-kaah, and Chistochina.

The decision will be made by the Palin administration’s Department of Environmental Conservation Commissioner, Larry Hartig.

The key, according to local fishermen and Alaska Natives, is that once oil is in the water, response would already be too late.

Cordova District Fishermen United, representing the Copper River salmon fleet, issued a resolution: “Any size spill into the Copper River and her tributaries might impact our fisheries. An oil spill that closed the world-famous Copper River Salmon commercial fishing season even for few days would destroy the reputation of Alaska’s premiere branded salmon and devastate our coastal fishing economy.”

The CDFU resolution called Alyeska’s failure to plan contingencies for the Copper River “an unconscionable error and omission and just one illustration of the disconnect between reality and oil spill planning and pipeline monitoring.”

“There is no way Alyeska could clean up a spill that escaped to the Copper’s river banks and braided channels,” said Kristin Smith of the Copper River Watershed Project.

“We simply want to ensure that oil shippers keep it in the pipe, rather than risk oil escaping into the Copper River, the irreplaceable lifeblood of our subsistence, commercial and sportfish salmon economies.”

“Watershed residents of all stripes are united in this,” Scott said. “When he’s heard the evidence, we expect the new commissioner will do the right thing.”

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