

FORUM

Tanker bill keeps old, small ships sailing too long

By WALTER B. PARKER

Now that everyone, including OPEC, is admitting the need to proceed toward double hulls as the standard for oil tanker construction it is imperative that the pace of fleet replacement and the determination of which tankers are replaced first receive detailed analysis.

As long as single-hulled tankers are at sea, the risk of oil spills is dramatically greater, as the analysis of the Alaska Oil Spill Commission shows. Double hulls by themselves add 31 years to the interval between Exxon Valdez-sized oil spills in Prince William Sound. No other improvement adds as much to the interval between spills.

Another factor more difficult to assess is the effect of age on the tanker accidents, but we know that age affects hull stress and lessens the ability of tankers to withstand the storms of the Gulf of Alaska. Older tankers also lack the complete range of technological improvements carried by newer tankers.

An analysis of the U.S. Senate Commerce Committee proposal for phasing out tankers reveals that the oldest, smallest ships would be phased out last and that is the main reason this proposal is faulty. Sen. Ted Stevens is strongly supporting this proposal.

The proposal is based on the premise that the largest tankers operating into Valdez are the most environmentally dangerous.

This is true only if we are willing to limit oil spill response to that which can handle



the spill from a small- or medium-sized tanker. It also overlooks the fact that smaller tankers mean more port calls. The commission has established a direct relationship between the number of port calls and the number of oil spills.

The Commerce Committee proposal also leaves the door open to substituting equal or better technology for double hulls at the discretion of the Secretary of Transportation after further studies by the National Academy of Sciences.

The commission examined the best state-of-the-art available in tanker technology today and found several systems, such as the "vacuum method" developed in Sweden, that had great merit for consideration in future tanker design. Nothing, however, replaced double hulls in effectiveness in limiting oil spills. This conclusion is based on the review of 20 years of studies on this subject.

The present fleet licensed to serve Alaska is composed of 93 ships. Eight are already double-hulled and are excluded from the following analysis. The remaining 85 have an average tonnage of 103,000 DWT and average 18 years of age. The fleet has more than enough capacity to lift the present

throughput of 1.9 million barrels per day, from Valdez.

By 1997, when Valdez throughput will be about 1 million barrels per day, the fleet will be reduced to 58 vessels of the present fleet. They will average in age at that time 24.5 years and have an average size of 76,000 tons. This fleet will also be able to handle the projected Valdez throughput. Therefore, under the Commerce Committee proposals it will not be necessary to build any double-hulled tankers through 1997.

By 2005 when the Commerce Committee phaseout ends, the fleet will be reduced to 10 of the present fleet plus the eight double-hulled tankers in existence. This fleet will average in age then 23 years and have an average size of 45,000 tons, excluding the double-hulled ships. The double-hulled ships will then average in age some 30 years and have an average size of 84,000 tons.

Projected Valdez throughput at that time can be adequately handled by the above fleet of 18 ships. Thus this proposal will require no new construction by 2005 unless dramatic increases in projected throughput at Valdez occur. The net result is to allow all existing known reserves on the North Slope to be served by the tanker fleet in existence now. There would be no requirement upon the industry to upgrade the fleet except for their own purposes.

The commission could find no correlation between tanker size and accidents. The tankers with the most casualties in the fleet licensed for Alaska at present are: the Cove

Trader (26), the Glacier Bay (19), and the Golden Gate (18). Under the Stevens-backed proposal the Cove Trader would be with us until 1999 when it would be 40 years old, the Glacier Bay and the Golden Gate until 2002 when both would be 32 years old.

As long as a ship is not oversized for the ports it serves there is no particular reason to limit vessel size. The trend toward megaships has apparently ended. Most new construction is planned in the 200,000- to 300,000-ton range except for that trade which demands smaller ships because of draft limitation.

The limit in Puget Sound of 125,000 tons was dictated partly by the constraints of the Inner Sound and partly by the desire to limit ship size. There is no reason for similar constraints at Valdez as long as the response capability is capable of handling a worst-case spill within 72 hours.

It is hard to believe that Alaska will be better served by keeping small, very old tankers in service until 2005. When one looks at the Commerce Committee bill this is exactly what it does and the congressional requirements, if the Stevens-backed proposal prevails, become meaningless insofar as Alaska is concerned. For that reason, the Commission supports HB 1465, double bottoms in seven years and double hulls in 15.

Walter B. Parker is chairman of the Alaska Oil Spill Commission.

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Coast Guard should open its eyes to risk at sea

By JOHN HAVELOCK

The loss of the Exxon Valdez lingers on in public consciousness, boosted by daily reports of environmental damage, repair and legal jousting. In comparison, the closing of the sea over the tomb of the nine young men of the Aleutian Enterprise has left scarcely a ripple.

This should not be the case. A Scottish M.P. visiting Alaska last summer remarked to me, "How extraordinary that you flay the Exxon Corporation but leave the government alone. In Europe, it would be the oversight case. Dereliction in government oversight would be the source of outrage." He had a point.

The loss of the Aleutian Enterprise is in direct link with the loss of the Exxon Valdez in illustrating the Coast Guard's hand-in-hand approach with industry to safety regulation.

Once again anachronistic attitudes toward the hazards of the sea are deterring appropriate safety measures. Once again a few have paid a terrible price. We will pay again in lives, as well as oiled beaches, until leadership at the top takes action.

The problem was illustrated by the pronouncements in Anchorage recently of since-retired Coast Guard Commandant Admiral Paul Yost. This is not to pick on the admiral who is undoubtedly a person of personal charm and integrity. His pronouncements

the delivery system or the system of federal and state regulation and oversight that is at fault.

Almost two years ago, the Congress responded to the agonized lament of a bereaved father who lost his son, a Yale undergraduate, in Alaska. Many of these vessels are unstable death traps, he said. The Congress heard the testimony and agreed, expanding the Coast Guard's police power. Where are they now?

The Coast Guard says it takes time to pass regulations. No warning went out to the mothers and wives of those who sign on to these vessels that it would be years before action was taken. The shift of the fleet to floating processors has resulted in the exposure of hundreds of untrained land-lubbers to maritime risks. How many more will die before our leaders feel the grief of the survivors? Is the state confident it has no safety jurisdiction?

It was the Coast Guard hierarchy that gave permission for the Exxon Valdez to go out of tanker lanes. Someone high in the Coast Guard, or above, decided double bottoms weren't necessary. A Coast Guard manager decided to drop pressure for Lorain C retransmission locating of vessels.

The downgrading of the Coast Guard radar system so it could no longer be used outside Valdez Arm was not an Exxon failure. The original system plotted tanker locations. The decision to drop this practice

was the Coast Guard's. Sen. Ted Stevens has said it: "Alaskans' failure to monitor developing oil transportation, oil spill prevention and spill recovery technologies and the failure of all concerned to demand constant upgrading of systems and personnel to apply the most current technologies to Alaska has cost us more than we will ever know."

For generations, those who mine coal were asked to accept the toll of death and destruction in the mines as the inevitable consequence of hazardous surroundings and human error. Hazardous farm machinery and practice cut a swath of life and limb through generations of farm hands and farmers, encouraged to accept the loss as inevitable.

Those who go down to the sea on ships for fish have too long, and with as little cause, accepted a similar notion. The deaths on the Aleutian Enterprise were as preventable as the death of the biosphere of Prince William Sound that Coast Guard Commandant Admiral Yost now so easily slides over.

A great many people have learned a lot from the Exxon Valdez tragedy. Those who have learned nothing should be replaced. We have a right to action.

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were all too typical of the blindness we have learned to expect from the Coast Guard: tilted to industry profit, passive on safety.

Admiral Yost was in Anchorage to review what might be done by the Exxon Corporation in renewing the cleanup of a colossal mess resulting from a system failure in Exxon Shipping, run by his personal friend and classmate, Frank Iarossi. Having made a quick tour of selected beach areas, the admiral announced himself satisfied that nature had worked wonders and there was little to do. He also said he would decide when Exxon was excused and gratuitously questioned the veracity of the damage assessment made by Alaska's governor.

Admiral Yost went on to champion the theory of the accident most favored by shipping company owners: that human error was the cause of the accident and whatever we do, similar groundings may happen again, a theory of regulatory complacency.

One fears Admiral Yost's successors will be looking for the same result in a report on the tragic sinking of the Aleutian Enterprise. It is always human error and never