

Secretary slams disaster plan

Senator blasts 'Keystone Kops' approach

WASHINGTON (AP) — Transportation Secretary Samuel Skinner told the Senate Wednesday that industry plans for dealing with an Alaskan oil spill had been a "zero." One senator said the initial response to the March 24 disaster reminded him of "the Keystone Kops."

Most witnesses before the Senate's environmental protection subcommittee — from federal officials to Alaska's governor and industry executives — said plans for dealing with a spill of oil from the Alaskan pipeline had not imagined an acci-

dent on the magnitude of the 10-million-gallon spill that soiled pristine Prince William Sound.

Skinner, asked to evaluate the plan developed by a consortium of oil companies that ship oil from Alaska's North slope through the pipeline and Valdez harbor, said the document should not have been approved by the state and should have brought warnings from the federal government that the plan was inadequate.

"On the scale of one to 10, it was a zero," Skinner said of the standby

procedures.

The secretary told the panel that, before the tanker Exxon Valdez grounded, everyone had "assumed that this would never happen."

"I don't think anybody was ready to deal with a spill of this magnitude," said Skinner, whose department oversees the Coast Guard.

The subcommittee's chairman, Sen. Max Baucus, D-Mont., complained that "there has never been a time when this situation was under control."

He said the response to the spill had demonstrated "a complete breakdown" of the procedures that were supposed to have been in effect since the federal government approved the Alaskan pipeline 16 years ago.

critical hours after the spill further delayed cleanup efforts.

He suggested that Alaskans had trusted the oil industry, which accounts for 85 percent of the state government's revenue, to take precautions. "We feel like we've been assaulted," he told the senators.

"From all accounts, the cleanup crews initially responding to this spill acted more like the Keystone Kops than the well-trained oil spill response team described in the industry's contingency plan," declared Sen. John Chafee, R-R.I.

Mauro: Texas not ready for oil tragedy in Gulf

AUSTIN (AP) — Texas is no more prepared than was Alaska for a major oil spill like that caused by the Exxon Valdez, and quick action is needed from both Congress and the Legislature to fix the problems, officials said Wednesday.

"Texas is not in any better shape to handle a major oil spill than was Exxon in the Port of Valdez," Land Commissioner Garry Mauro said.

The tanker Exxon Valdez ran aground March 24, spilling some 10 million gallons of oil. Tankers ply Texas waters daily due to the state's huge oil industry. Wynne noted that of 2,000 incidents in Texas last year, about half involved oil, although most were inland.

Should a Valdez-style accident happen off the Texas coast, the officials said, the state could be in trouble.

Soviet oil-skimmer steams into Alaska to join cleanup effort

SEWARD, Alaska (AP) — A Soviet ship that can skim oil on the high seas joined the war against the nation's worst oil spill Wednesday, docking in a town named for the man who bought Alaska from Russia for \$7.2 million.

Ken Safford, who snapped photos as the ship arrived a little before 8 a.m. "It's huge."

By midmorning, a stream of tourists were driving up to the dock to take pictures and wave to the crew.

The ship came to Seward for refueling and probably would be in port all day, Coast Guard Capt. Rene Roussel said.

The 11,400-ton Vaidogubsky, 425 feet long, steamed 30 miles up fjord-like Resurrection Bay under a cloudy sky, flying the Soviet hammer and sickle from its stern and an American flag from its towering white superstructure.

The oil spilled March 24 by an Exxon tanker is becoming very thick and difficult to deal with as it weathers, Roussel said.

"We don't know how it (the Vaidogubsky) is going to work in the kind of oil we're skimming," he said. "Our goal is to get in the oil. We'll probably use it in Resurrection Bay for awhile."

It tied up at a railroad dock, its decks strewn with heavy equipment, smoke spewing from its stacks.

The Vaidogubsky works with two motorboats that drag a boom to corral the oil. Then two pipes working like 100-foot straws dip into the oil and suck it onto the larger ship, said a Soviet crewman who spoke in halting English.

Bush, Hussein agree to work for peace

WASHINGTON (AP) — President Bush and Jordan's King Hussein agreed Wednesday to strive for "a serious negotiating process" for Middle East peace, and the United States said the monarch did not reject an Israeli proposal for Palestinian elections in the West Bank and Gaza.

and to focus on the difficult but critical work of structuring a serious negotiating process.

"His majesty committed Jordan to this task, and I commit the United States to this task," Bush said.

After the two leaders talked for more than an hour at the White House, the administration expressed satisfaction over Hussein's statement to Bush that "I fully support you and all your efforts."

"The time has come to encourage fresh thinking, to avoid sterile debate, and to focus on the difficult but critical work of structuring a serious negotiating process."

— President Bush

Hussein's visit marked the end of the first round of Middle East diplomacy for Bush, following talks earlier this month with Egypt's President Hosni Mubarak and Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Shamir.

The administration said the next step was to develop Shamir's proposal for the 1.7 million Palestinians in the occupied territories to elect representatives to negotiate with Israel on limited self-government.

As he had done with the two others, Bush played tour guide for the king.

He took Hussein by helicopter to Mount Vernon, Va., to visit the home of George Washington overlooking the Potomac River. They returned to the capital on a yacht confiscated from drug merchants and now owned by the Navy.

Standing alongside Hussein in a Rose Garden ceremony, Bush said, "The time has come to encourage fresh thinking, to avoid sterile debate,

on the condition that the elections lead to negotiations on the final status of the territories.

Deputy Assistant Secretary of State Ned Walker told Congress that the United States wants a timetable from Israel by July for the elections.

But he said that "serious difficulties" remain over what kind of elections would be held and which Palestinians would agree to take part.

Walker said it should not matter to Israel whether candidates are card-carrying members of the Palestine Liberation Organization. Shamir has ruled out negotiating with the PLO, which he holds responsible for the violence that has wracked the occupied territories.

In his public remarks, Bush said that "properly designed and mutually acceptable elections could, as an initial step, contribute to a political process leading to negotiations on the final status of the West Bank and Gaza."

Hussein did not publicly mention the Israeli election proposal, but a senior administration official said, "He certainly did not reject the idea."

The official, who declined to be named, said Hussein expressed "some concerns" about the elections.

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