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Secretary slams disaster plan

ration Senator blasts 'Keystone Kops' approach

WASHINGTON (AP) — Transportation Secretary Samuel Skinner million-gallon spill that soiled pristine Prince William Sound. dustry plans for dealing with an Alaskan oil spill had been a "zero." him of "the Keystone Kops.

ecutives — said plans for dealing quate.
with a spill of oil from the Alaskan "On the scale of one to 10, it was a

Skinner, asked to evaluate the plan developed by a consortium of One senator said the initial response oil companies that ship oil from the March 24 disaster reminded Alaska's North slope through the pipeline and Valdez harbor, said the Most witnesses before the Senate's document should not have been apenvironmental protection subcom-mittee — from federal officials to brought warnings from the federal Alaska's governor and industry ex- government that the plan was inade-

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., com-plained that "there has never been a time when this situation was under

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

Alaska Gov. Steve Lowper blamed complacency at all levels for the poor preparedness, but also said that there had not been adequate equipment on hand, that channels of authority were unclear, and that a lack of leadership and direction in the

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 pre-cautions. "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 re-sponse team described in the industry's contingency plan," declared Sen. John Chafee, R-R.I.

Skinner said the Bush administration's decision to leave the primary responsibility for the cleanup in Exxon's hands stemmed from a belief that the company had committed itself to the cleanup and "had the technical expertise to deal with the problem." He said he has been "disappointed" that the giant oil company has not been able to assemble resources more effectively to better protect the Alaska coastline.

Soviet oil-skimmer steams into Alaska to join cleanup effort

viet 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.

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

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

About 100 yards away, crews unloaded oil-soaked booms and absorbent material from the cleanup at Nuka Bay, one of the most polluted sites on the southern coast of the Kenai Peninsula.

"It's pretty impressive for a skimmer," said Coast Guard Petty Officer

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 re-fueling and probably would be in port all day, Coast Guard Capt. Rene

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.

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 halt-

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 spill at Valdez has made two things crystal clear: We are now living in an age where major oil spills can happen anytime and, quite frankly, we don't know how

to handle them," he said. Mauro, Galveston Mayor Jan Coggeshall, state Rep. Robert Saunders, and state Water Commissioner Buck Wynne all said the federal government needs to put more oil-spill equipment closer to Texas. The heavy-duty equipment intended for Gulf Coast use currently is kept in Virginia and medium-duty gear is in Alabama, Mauro said.

The officials also urged Congress to provide more funds, asked the Legislature to approve abill to strengthen the current response plan and recommended that "spill drills" be started so the state will be prepared in case of a catastrophe

"Anywhere major tanker traffic goes, there is a chance of a major disaster," Ms. Coggeshall said.
"Thirty of the last 33 major disasters in the world have occurred not from platform accidents but from tankers. I think that we are all vulnerable."

pipeline had not imagined an acci- zero," Skinner said of the standby

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 in-

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

Although the barrier islands would offer some protection should a spill occur outside them, an accident inside the islands would be disastrous.

"If it happened inside our barrier islands, in the estuaries, we would not be able to respond soon enough without catastrophic results. . . . We could not boom a heavy, major spill inside the estuaries with the equipment that far away (without) major ecological damage," Mauro said.
"It would be a matter of wait-

ing 24 to 48 hours, depending on the severity of the spill," Wynne added. "And that is a very critical time, as we've learned in Alaska.'

Among the officials' recom-mendations was state legislative approval of a bill authored by Saunders, chairman of the House Environmental Affairs Committee, to strengthen the current response plan by contracting for cleanup crews annually - rather than requiring the state to take bids after a spill occurs.

The measure would allow the state to go directly to the responsible party to recover costs of a cleanup. Texas now must go through the federal government.

Bush, Hussein agree to work for peace

Jordan's King Hussein agreed Wednesday to structuring a serious negotiating process. structuring a serious negotiating process. "His majesty committed Jordan to this task, and I commit the United States to this task," monarch did not reject an Israeli proposal for Palestinian elections in the West Bank and Gaza. After the two leaders talked for more than an hour at the White House, the administration expressed satisfaction over Hussein's statment to Bush that "I fully support you and all your ef-

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

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 Washingon overlooking the Potomac River. They re turned 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,

WASHINGTON (AP) — President Bush and and to focus on the difficult but critical work of

and I commit the United States to this task," Bush said.

"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

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 lim-

The United States has endorsed the proposal

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 elec-

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 responsibile for the violence that has wracked the occupied territories.

In his public remarks, Bush said that "prop-

erly 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

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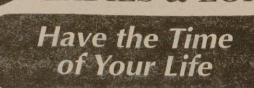
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