

## Exxon Valdez owners actively seek federal subsidy to overturn ban

□ The request, which is currently under review, would allow the ship and crew to once again enter the waters of Alaska.

WASHINGTON (AP) — The tanker Exxon Valdez was banned from sailing to Alaska following the massive 1989 oil spill. Now its owners are seeking a federal subsidy, saying the ban forces the ship into money-losing foreign trade.

The subsidy request is under review at the Maritime Administration and spokesman John N. Swank could not say when a decision might be made.

The 211,000-ton tanker, now called the SeaRiver Mediterranean, became infamous in 1989 when it ran aground on Bligh Reef in Prince William Sound, spilling 11 million gallons of oil. The Oil Pollution Act of 1990 included a provision banning the ship from Alaska.

SeaRiver Financial Holdings, an Exxon Corp., subsidiary based in Irving, Texas, which owns and operates the vessel, says the ban

forces the ship into overseas trade. The company wants to join a federal subsidy program designed to help ships with American crews compete with less expensive foreign vessels.

"The vessel is excluded from transporting oil from Valdez and that's the trade for which it was originally built," Art Stephen, a SeaRiver spokesman, said. He said the vessel is too large to operate in East Coast ports.

The amount of money sought was not immediately clear because the amount of a subsidy is negotiated between the owners and government at the time it is approved. The Operating Differential Subsidy program assists about 50 vessels with an average annual payment of about \$3 million.

The renamed tanker has operated in foreign trade since 1990, primarily carrying Middle Eastern oil to Europe. It has completed more than 60 voyages during that time, but SeaRiver reported it is losing money in that trade and faces the prospect of continuing losses.

In 1991, Exxon agreed to make payments totaling \$900 million through 2001 to settle state and federal charges arising from the environmental damage in the

Alaska oil spill. In a separate lawsuit brought by Alaska residents, a jury has ordered Exxon to pay \$5 billion in punitive damages, a ruling that is on appeal.

The Maritime Administration provides subsidies to American-flagged vessels to help them compete with foreign ships that pay their crews less and often have to meet less costly rules and regulations.

The subsidies can be transferred between ship operators with permission of the government, and this is what SeaRiver has proposed. It acquired rights to the subsidy, which expires in 2001, from the bankrupt Equity Carriers Inc.

Stephen said the subsidy SeaRiver purchased covers three vessels but the company was seeking only the single subsidy.

Even while the decision is pending on that move, however, the future of maritime subsidies in general is in question, with bills in Congress to end the program. Hearings are expected after the Easter recess.

The goal of the subsidies is to make sure that a minimum merchant shipping service is maintained under American control and crews, particularly for use in the event of war.

## NASA scoffs at superstition, but no more '13' missions

□ The many coincidences that surrounded Apollo 13's moon mission in 1970 are currently giving cause for some to ponder the significance of the number "13."

CAPE CANAVERAL, Fla. (AP) — Apollo 13's astronauts and flight controllers scoffed at it from the start. Superstitious about the number 13? Bring on the black cats, they said.

Even when an oxygen tank in the spaceship exploded on April 13, 1970 — 25 years ago Thursday — and the moon mission was aborted, Apollo 13 commander Jim Lovell, his crew and NASA refused to believe it had anything to do with fate.

Lovell wasn't superstitious then, and he's not now. But he's not so sure about NASA.

"NASA officially claims that they're not superstitious about 13," he said. "But I dare you to go back in the logs and look at any other (manned) spacecraft after Apollo 13 that ever had the number 13 in it. There is not another — and most of them were shuttles — there's not one shuttle that had 13."

NASA stopped numbering shuttle flights in normal sequence after the ninth in 1983 because launch delays were jumbling the order. Instead, a confounding combination of numbers and letters was used.

NASA's 13th Pioneer space probe was called Pioneer Venus 2 or the Pioneer Venus Multiprobe — rarely Pioneer 13. It reached Venus in 1978 four months after launch.

NOAA-13, a weather satellite developed by NASA for the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, fell silent 12 days after its 1993 launch.

Hmmm, makes you wonder. Save yourself the energy, NASA officials say. "I've been with the Pioneer project and NASA for 32 years, and I never in all my years have heard any kind of talk about superstition," said Pioneer project manager Fred Wirth. "Oh, occasionally somebody says, 'You don't want to do that

(spacecraft maneuver) on Friday the 13th.' But it's kind of in a joke."

Former NASA historian Alex Roland isn't surprised the space agency assigned the number 13 to what was supposed to be the third manned moon landing (and the subject of a soon-to-be-released movie starring Tom Hanks as Lovell).

"It just reflected their whole culture: This is not about fate or chance or luck or anything. We engineered it, and so it's going to work," Roland said.

Astronaut Thomas "Ken" Mattingly, in fact, wanted a Friday the 13th launch so the mission patch could bear a picture of a black cat. As it turns out, Mattingly was exposed to German measles a week before liftoff and was bumped off Apollo 13. Jack Swigert replaced him.

Apollo 13 was launched on Tuesday, April 11,

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— Fred Wirth,  
Pioneer project manager

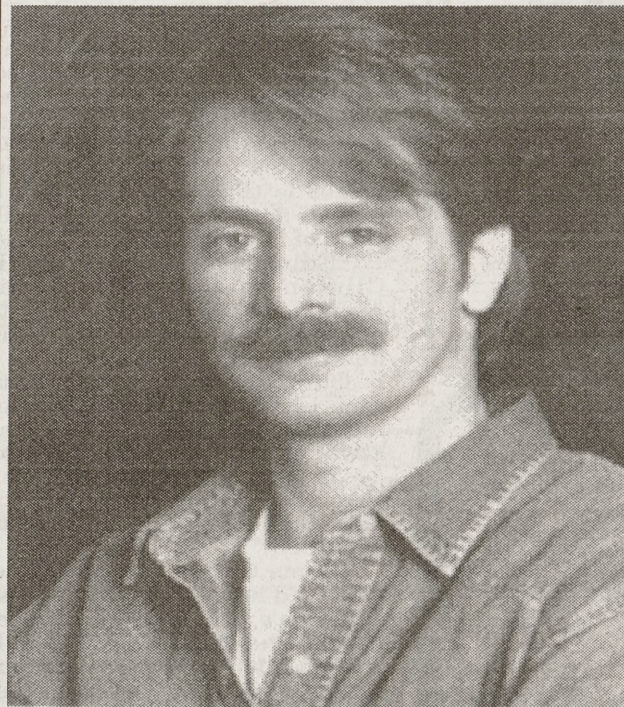
1970, or 4-11-70 — 4 plus one plus one plus seven plus zero equals 13. Launch time was 2:13 p.m. at Kennedy Space Center, 1:13 p.m. at Mission Control in Houston or 13:13 military time.

The oxygen tank on the spacecraft ruptured when the three astronauts were 200,000 miles from Earth, four-fifths of the way to the moon. They used the lunar lander, with its own oxygen, power and steering, as a lifeboat.

A few hours before reaching Earth, Lovell, Swigert and Haise powered up the command module and jettisoned the lunar lander. They plopped into the Pacific Ocean on Friday, April 17 — in Italy, comparable to Friday the 13th. Go figure.

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