

History of Valdez, Alaska

In 1790, Don Salvador Fidalgo named the Port of Valdez after the celebrated Spanish naval officer Antonio Valdes y Basan. A town developed in 1898 as a debarkation point for men seeking a route to the Eagle Mining District and the Klondike goldfields. Valdez soon became the supply center of its own gold mining region and incorporated as a city in 1901.

The original town site of Valdez was completely destroyed on Good Friday in 1964 by the strongest recorded earthquake ever to strike the North American continent. This was registered as 9.2 on the Richter scale. In addition, tsunamis generated by the earthquake ravaged the town. Five percent of the population of Valdez was killed in this disaster. As a result, the town site was condemned unsafe and the city was relocated 4 miles to the west.

During the 1970's, the Trans Alaska Pipeline System was constructed for the transportation of North Slope crude oil. This pipeline stretches 800 miles from Barrow on the North Slope to Valdez in the Prince William Sound. As the southern terminus of the Trans Alaska Pipeline, Valdez became the largest crude oil port in North America. The oil is stored in Valdez and from there it is transported via supertankers to locations in the continental United States.

On Good Friday in 1989, the supertanker Exxon Valdez ran aground on Bligh Reef in Prince William Sound. The resulting oil spill was one of the greatest man-made environmental disasters to hit North America. Although the oil fouled hundreds of miles of Prince William Sound shoreline, contrary to popular belief, oil neither approached nor contaminated the shores of the Port of Valdez. Yet, Valdez was the operational center for the massive clean up of the oil spill.

As a result of the 1989 spill, a new issue, oil spill response preparedness and oversight, became a regional industry and significant economic sector of Valdez. The Prince William Sound Regional Citizens Advisory Council (RCAC) was established as a watchdog organization that oversaw safety and spill response issues for oil transportation in Prince William Sound. RCAC's membership representation stems from many communities, Native Alaskans, and interested organizations around Prince William Sound. Ship Escort and Response Vessel Service (SERVES), was established with a fleet of modern vessels, home ported in Valdez, to escort oil tankers through Prince William Sound. In order to immediately respond to oil spills, these vessels are equipped with state-of-the-art oil spill response equipment and technology, and are supported by a sophisticated ready response industry.