

Island Tides ^{Reprint}

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Reprint from Volume 17 Number 24

December 15, 2005

Black Gold: A Series On Oil

More Alaska oil could pass Gulf Island shores

Patrick Brown

The continuing increase in the demand for gasoline in the United States has led to an oil industry push to develop potential oilfields under the Alaska National Wildlife Reserve (ANWR). Many Canadians are aware of the possible environmental effects on the calving grounds of the caribou who roam Alaska and northern Canada. But there is another possible environmental impact on Canada—that of increased tanker traffic through the Strait of Juan de Fuca into Puget Sound.

Currently some 600 tankers per year, most from Alaska, bring oil into Puget Sound to supply refineries at Anacortes and Ferndale, Washington, and a small refinery at Tacoma. The international boundary runs down the middle of the shipping channel; inbound tankers travel on the Washington State side, outbound on the Canadian side.

Unlike tankers in Prince William Sound, Alaska, where the *Exxon Valdez* caused an 11 million gallon oilspill in 1989, tankers travelling in the Strait of Juan de Fuca, Rosario Strait, and Puget Sound are not required to be accompanied by tugs or clean-up vessels, even though these waters are all part of the Puget Sound–Georgia Basin ecosystem. Puget Sound is particularly vulnerable, since it is an ‘inland sea’ with limited water exchange.

A lesson in point: on November 11, 2005, an inbound tanker (named, ironically, *Puget Sound*) carrying 13.8 million gallons of jet fuel, was required by the US Coast Guard to return to Port Angeles for repairs after it experienced engine trouble as it entered Rosario Strait. It did, and there was no disaster. But the potential is there.

Repealing The Magnuson Amendment

Tanker traffic in these waters has been effectively limited by a 1977 amendment to the US *Marine Mammal Protection Act* (1972) which forbids the construction of new oil unloading facilities in Puget Sound beyond those required to serve Washington State’s own oil needs. This amendment was piloted through the US Congress by the late Senator Warren Magnuson, and was intended to protect Puget Sound from the increasing danger of oil spills. Magnuson died in 1989, the same year as the *Exxon Valdez* spill.

Now, the same oil industry that is making repeated attempts to obtain Congressional authorization for drilling in the ANWR is also trying to get the Magnuson Amendment repealed. Led by Republican Senator Ted Stevens of Alaska, the industry attempted this through an amendment to the *Gasoline for America Act* in October this year. The amendment was dropped from the bill in order to secure its passage (since the bill contained numerous other provisions that would benefit the oil industry).

But new legislation has now been introduced by Senator Stevens to repeal the Magnuson Amendment.

Senator Stevens is a supporter of ANWR drilling, is chair of the Senate Commerce, Science, and Transportation Committee, and is widely regarded as having close connections to BP, owners of the Cherry Point refinery near Ferndale, Washington.

Democratic Senator Maria Cantwell, who represents Washington State, is leading efforts in the Senate to oppose ANWR drilling. She has also vowed to filibuster any new attempt to repeal the Magnuson Amendment. In a letter to Senate majority leader Bill Frist, a Republican (Republicans have a majority in the Senate), she says, ‘The super risks of overturning the Magnuson Amendment far outweigh any benefits of turning Puget Sound into a superhighway for supertankers.’ Cantwell is up for re-election next fall, in the US mid-term elections.

Cherry Point Refinery

Cherry Point, built in 1971 is the largest and newest refinery in Washington State, and actually built an additional dock in 1996 under a permit from the US Army Corps of Engineers. However, the dock has not been used; its legality was challenged under the Magnuson Amendment, and the US 9th District Court of Appeals (which covers seven western states including California, Oregon, and Washington, plus Hawaii and Alaska) ruled that the Corps had to produce a new environmental impact statement. This will be reviewed next June.

The 9th District Court has a record of judgements favouring environmental protection; Republicans in Congress have

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‘This article was published (December 15, 2005) in ‘Island Tides’, an independent, regional newspaper distributing across the Southern Strait of Georgia from Tsawwassen to Victoria to Nanaimo.’

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proposed breaking it up. The Court has never ruled on the legality of the Magnuson Amendment itself.

Double Hull, Double Trouble

In response to the *Exxon Valdez* spill, the US enacted the 1990 *Oil Pollution Act*, which required that by 2015, all tankers operating in the US be double-hulled. The previous generation of tankers, single hulled, had shown long-term corrosion of their steel hulls, leading to eventual breakups and many major oil spills around the world. The new generation of double-hulled tankers has shown new corrosion patterns, particularly in the spaces separating the outer hull from the inner cargo tanks. These spaces, often used as saltwater ballast tanks when the cargo tanks are empty, have shown increased galvanic corrosion. They also transport marine organisms from one part of the world to another; Washington State has enacted legislation requiring that these tanks be emptied and refilled in the open ocean.


Worldwide, there are 3,000 tankers operating, about half of which were built before 1990. Almost 700 are more than twenty years old, and may be vulnerable to breakup from the combined effects of corrosion and fatigue. Some 640 double-hull tankers were built between 1998 and 2001, leading to an oil transport

glut, reductions in possible profits, and the deferral of maintenance.

Supplying California

During the past summer, the damage to US refining capacity from Hurricane Katrina revealed that the building and expansion of US refineries over the past few years had not kept pace with demand. This is particularly true on the west coast of the US. No new refineries have been built in either Oregon or California, where some of the strictest environmental laws in the US are in effect.

BP says it has already invested \$115 million at Cherry Point to produce the ultra-clean gasoline required by California law. But the chief executive of BP, Ross Pillari, has suggested that should the Magnuson Amendment not be repealed, he would reduce the production of the Cherry Point refinery by 10%; if the Magnuson amendment were eliminated, Cherry Point would be expanded.

A spokesperson for Washington Governor Christine Gregoire (Democrat) said: 'Washington is willing to do its share, but our waters shouldn't be threatened for the sake of other states.' 

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'This article was published (December 15, 2005) in 'Gulf Islands, Island Tides'. 'Island Tides' is an independent, regional newspaper distributing 15,000-20,000 copies in the Southern Strait of Georgia from Tsawwassen to Victoria, BC.'

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