

Florida seeks lesson in Alaska's disaster

Worried that Florida's oil-spill cleanup plans would be disastrously inadequate in the face of a massive spill, state officials plan to fly to Alaska on Sunday to learn how to be better prepared.

A three-person team dispatched by Gov. Bob Martinez will spend five days in Alaska, meeting with state officials and visiting Valdez — the town hardest hit by the March 24 spill — and Cordova, also damaged and home to a major fish hatchery.

"We ought to be able to glean some practical and worthwhile knowledge from this trip," said Estus Whitfield, environmental policy coordinator for the governor's office.

The visiting team will focus on six areas: How well and quickly Alaskan officials responded to the

240,000-barrel tanker spill; what cleanup technology they used that might work in Florida; how the cleanup techniques addressed environmental concerns; what the economic impacts are; the way various interests cooperated; and how Florida could change its cleanup plans.

After a major oil spill off Mexico spread oil along Texas beaches several years ago, visiting Florida officials learned that oily sand can be hidden beneath several inches of clean sand, concealing the extent of the damage. That information helped in 1987 when crews had to clean a 100,000-gallon spill off Jacksonville Beach.

— LISANNE RENNER

tremendous made."

Doris Mager popka, founder of Save Our Rican Raptors, flew to Alaska Westra and Shaw; Mary Alark, a wildlife rehabilitation center in Osteen; and Jeff Winpostal service worker in Orlan

The group stid into a scene of mass confuswhere scores of less fortunate nteers bedded down on a ch floor, slept in cars or renteoms in private homes. Exxon ided the Central Florida g with a motel room after it arl Saturday.

Mager, knots "The Eagle Lady," expecto clean birds. Since the tanExxon Valdez spilled 240,000rels of oil into Prince Williamund on March 24, about 220ds have been brought to thelez rescue center. But the vopers were badly needed in the center, where cleaning is moporious.

Rescued ottare brought to the center for hing and medical treatment r being netted by fishermen delivered by helicopter andcks. Sea otters have short, thiustrous fur that keeps them n in the frigid ocean. Oil rufhis insulation and many otteffer from hypothermia when arrive.

The Florida intees pitched in with everyt from drying otters with hair rs to scrubbing their cages anling pails with water and Davishwashing detergent. Outfitn rain gear donated by an ndo company, they were dud "the yellow slicker brigade

Otters are sed and stretched out on a rope above a drain while a five-ph team scrubs each oily pelth warm water and Dawn. "It'e shampooing your hair," saMager, "but it could take twours to do one

animal."

It takes another four hours to blow-dry an otter.

Feeding is a constant task. "There's a good possibility that even though we're feeding them, they're starving to death because their insides are so oiled," said Shaw.

Despite heroic efforts death is a prominent specter, affecting volunteers long after an otter is carried away in a plastic bag. Mager wonders about the fate of an otter with "personality plus" that was seriously ill when she left.

Back at home, the wildlife rescue workers are trying to take care of Florida's own. Shaw has cages full of new problems in her east Orange County back yard. There's a crippled sandhill crane, a one-eyed screech owl, a red-shouldered hawk unable to fly and a paralyzed skunk. On Thursday afternoon a mockingbird probably poisoned by pesticide died despite medicine and a heat-ing pad.

"To us that bird is as important as an otter," said Shaw. "These birds are like the canary to the miner. They're trying to tell us something. We just have to listen."



Cindy Westra, 37, and four other Central Florida volunteers went to Alaska to help wildlife injured by the oil spill. Here are excerpts from Westra's diary:

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The loss here is profound!!! All we have learned in the past years is to be utilized now to help heal the damage man has done.

We are needed here. Not for the short term that we expected of one week. It's not just otters and birds as we were thinking. Deer are now sick from the kelp; eagles and other birds of prey are in danger along with foxes, bears, wolves and other mammals. This is a national disaster of tremendous magnitude.

....There are no accidents in this universe - - we are here for a reason.Mobile units are being constructed now - - they need experienced wildlife people. Whoever goes back must keep up public awareness and support. Future volunteers are needed as enthusiasm wanes. It is not a futile or token effort - - it is an effort that for every life we save we are working toward the preservation of the species.

We will fight hard for their little lives, each and every one of them. As I look into their terror-filled eyes, I see that they are innocent victims of man's doing. Their food is deadly and will be for some time. We are very wanted here, and I have only begun to find our spot.

How to help

The team of al Florida residents who helpscue Alaskan wildlife receiveany donations of equipment money. They were outfitted aterproof gear donated by theazon Hose & Rubber Co. Pulhd Winn-Dixie contributed Dav detergent, Walt Disney World thin some towels, and veterinlins provided medicine. Plane ts — at \$590

a person — were paid for by numerous contributors, including Wayne Densch Inc., Frank Hubbard, the Orlando Humane Society, the Carlise Crane Co. and the Tomax Corp.

The volunteers, however, need additional donations to defray their costs. Donations can be sent to Back to Nature, 19625 Lake Pickett Road, Orlando, Fla. 32820.