

Hello again! I'm Jim Tedder in Washington with the program that helps you to learn and improve your American English. Today we look back 25 years to a disaster that affected the environment and the economy in our northernmost state.

Then ...some politics. Some experts say this election year is looking good for the Republican party. We will examine the situation in detail.

It's nice to have you with us as we learn about our world ...As It Is.

This week marks the 25th anniversary of the Exxon Valdez oil spill. The Exxon Valdez was a huge tanker, a ship built to carry large amounts of oil. On March 24, 1989, the tanker set sail from the port of Valdez in the state of Alaska. Then the Exxon Valdez struck rocks in Prince William Sound. Forty-one-point-five million liters of oil leaked into the water.

The Exxon Valdez produced the greatest environmental disaster from an oil spill in US history. The spill marked a turning point in the prevention and reaction to such accidents.

For weeks, oil leaking from the Exxon Valdez spread along the coastline of Alaska. Debbie Payton works for the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration. The federal agency, known as NOAA, is responsible for taking steps when disasters strike. Ms. Payton remembers visiting communities affected by the oil spill.

“There were oiled birds. There were some marine mammals that could be seen surfacing through the oil. There was oil on the beaches.”

Hundreds of thousands of sea animals died. Debbie Payton and other NOAA workers did what they could to keep the oil from spreading. They used special equipment to trap and recover the oil in Prince William Sound. They burned oil and covered rocks on land with chemical dispersants.

However, oily areas can still be seen today. Ms. Payton now leads NOAA's Office of Response and Restoration. She says Alaska's coast and fisheries appear healthy. But she adds that there are exceptions.

The herring industry has collapsed. This former fisherman wonders whether local businesses will ever go fishing for herring again.

"Typically say, for the herring season, we might have made \$35,000, \$40,000. Now, nothing, of course, nothing."

The U.S. Supreme Court limited the amount of corrective damages against Exxon at \$2.5 billion. Exxon also spent over \$4 billion in cleanup payments, settlements and fines. Critics say the company should have done more. But a spokesman for Exxon Mobil, Richard Keil, called it a fair deal. He spoke to VOA on Skype.

“We took immediate responsibility for the spill, and the payments we’ve made are based on agreements worked out in court with input from all parties. It’s also important to note that the company voluntarily compensated more than 11,000 Alaskans and businesses within a year of the spill.”

Mr. Keil says the Exxon Valdez spill was a low point in his company’s history. But he also says Exxon Mobil now puts safety first.

“(It’s) the number one factor guiding any and all business decisions we make. We want to protect the environment we’re operating in, the communities we’re part of and our employees, contractors, and the people who live near our operations.”

Debbie Payton says the spill also led to other changes like a new law, the Oil Pollution Act of 1990.

“It led to double-hulled tankers. It led to community action groups, better integration with response communities -- all the way from the oil spill response organizations, private entities, responsible parties through the state and federal governments.”

The National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration went on to develop an online information system to predict spills in real time.

“And that allows us to just pull pieces of information together quicker and see them quicker so that we can make decisions that much quicker.”

Today NOAA responds to between 100 and 150 spills a year. Chuck Clusen is with the Natural Resources Defense Council. He says the anniversary of the Exxon Valdez spill is a reminder of an important lesson.

“The government and the industry must understand that there are places that you simply cannot go.”

It Is An Election Year in the United States

The United States has begun preparing for congressional elections coming up in November. Republican Party leaders are increasingly sure that the party's candidates will make gains in Congress. Republicans seem especially sure of winning seats in the Senate, which the Democratic Party now controls.

Political experts generally agree that the 2014 elections will be a good year for Republicans and maybe not so good for Democrats. Anna Matteo tells us more.

Lawmakers from both political parties and the Obama administration are increasingly thinking about the November elections. These midterm elections are when voters elect all 435 members of the House of Representatives. Voters will also fill 36 of the 100 Senate seats.

For now, most political experts say it is likely Republicans will hold on to or even add to their majority in the House. Many experts also feel that Republicans have an excellent chance of winning six additional seats in the Senate. This would give them a majority. The Democrats would lose control of the Senate.

There are several reasons Republicans are looking forward to the midterm elections. Many Democrats currently in office are retiring. John Fortier works for the Bipartisan Policy Center. He notes that some Democrats are facing difficult races in states with a strong Republican base.

“The Senate Republicans have a real opportunity to pick up seats, but they need six seats, which is a lot. The good news for Republicans is that many of these states are in very strongly Republican states.”

He also notes that President Barack Obama has a low public approval rating. John Fortier thinks this could help Republican candidates.

“The two biggest factors underlying a midterm election are how is the economy doing and how is the president in the White House doing.”

Another issue in November will be how the American public feels about the country’s new health care law. The legislation is known as the Affordable Care Act. Republicans plan to publicize their opposition to the law during the election campaign, says House Speaker John Boehner.

“The truth is you can’t fix this law. It needs to be torn out by its roots. You may be tired of hearing about this, but as long as this law is around and making things worse, we’re going to keep fighting it.”

President Obama is quick to defend Affordable Care Act. He accuses Republicans of having no interest in wanting to fix the law.

“And it is not just to try to improve the law or here is a particular problem with it. No, we just want to scrap it so that millions of people who now have health insurance, we want them to go back to not having health insurance. Well that is not going to happen.”

The president has been warning his Democratic supporters that they need to vote in November. He notes that Republicans often do better in midterm elections because there is low voter turnout, meaning fewer people go to vote.

Tom DeFrank is a longtime political observer with the magazine National Journal. He feels that if Republicans take control of the Senate, most legislation will halt during the final two years of Mr. Obama’s term. This will then produce more of what he calls, legislative “gridlock.”

“If he loses the Senate in November he will be reduced to governing by veto, denying the Republicans what they want to do. I think it’s gridlock and damage control the rest of the way.”

The last time Republicans controlled both houses of Congress was during the presidency of George W. Bush. I'm Anna Matteo.

And I'm Jim Tedder in Washington. More Learning English programs are up next, and there is world news at the beginning of the hour on VOA.

