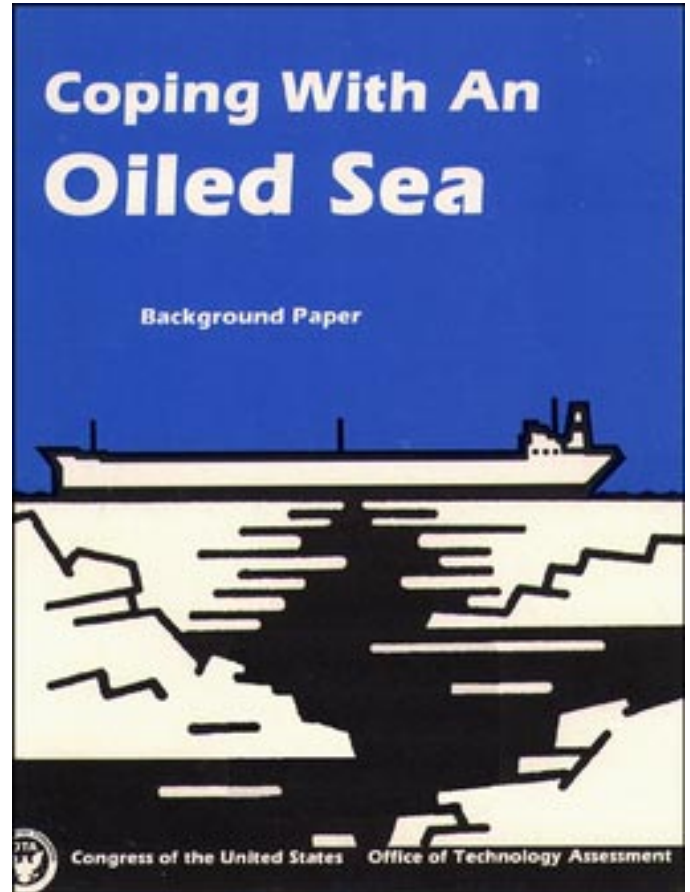


Coping With an Oiled Sea

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Foreword

In the aftermath of the Exxon *Valdez* oil spill in Alaska in March, 1989, a myriad of investigations were initiated to evaluate the causes of that accident and to propose remedies. The Office of Technology Assessment was asked to study the Nation's oil spill clean-up capabilities and to assess the technologies for responding to such catastrophic spills in the future. The request for this study came from Senator Ted Stevens, a member of the Technology Assessment Board, and from Congressman Billy Tauzin, Chairman of the Subcommittee on Coast Guard and Navigation of the House Committee on Merchant Marine and Fisheries. This background paper presents the results of OTA's analysis. It discusses the current technologies and capabilities in the United States and abroad and evaluates the prospects for future improvements.

Cleaning up a discharge of millions of gallons of oil at sea under even moderate environmental conditions is an extraordinary problem. Current national capabilities to respond effectively to such an accident are marginal at best. *OTA's analysis* shows that improvements could be made, and that those offering the greatest benefits would not require technological breakthroughs—just good engineering design and testing, skilled maintenance and training, timely access to and availability of the most appropriate and substantial systems, and the means to make rapid, informed decisions. One must understand, however, that even the best national response system will have inherent practical limitations that will hinder spill response efforts for catastrophic events—sometimes to a major extent. For that reason it is important to pay at least equal attention to preventive measures as to response systems. In this area, the proverbial ounce of prevention is worth many, many pounds of cure.


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