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Close your eyes and imagine for a moment. You retired from the WA Department of Ecology in 2025. Now you're sitting on the deck of your small cabin on Orcas Island. Your grandkids love to visit in the summer and play on the beach, where they build forts out of driftwood.

Years ago, you participated in Earth Day events at college and shifted your major to marine biology in hopes you could make a small but real contribution toward protecting and improving the environment.

Over time, you did good things, even as you experienced the real-world politics revealing the limits on what government can do. You saw first-hand how powerful special interests pressured elected officials and regulators to weaken environmental rules that would benefit the broader public.

Today, on that deck looking out at the Salish Sea, your screen beeps. You glance down at the scrolling news: a major oil spill has occurred at Stuart Island near the Turn Point Lighthouse. A huge tanker ship, carrying diluted bitumen from Canada to China, ran aground. The tanker was spilling both the fuel that powers it as well as its cargo of non-floating oil (dilbit) made from Alberta tar sands that will sink quickly to the sea bottom.

It's a massive disaster that likely will damage severely the Salish Sea and the San Juan Islands for decades. And it's a disaster that the advocates of the Trans Mountain Pipeline expansion repeatedly promised could never happen.

Your heart sinks. You think back to 2019 when you were still working at the Department of Ecology considering draft rules to update oil spill contingency plans. You wanted tougher rules that would mean faster, more comprehensive responses to oil spill emergencies.

But even with elected leaders broadly supporting environmental progress, other powerful forces argued that budgets were tight. They said the state just couldn't afford the cost of the equipment and personnel to provide the right response to oil spills.

As you sit on that Orcas porch reading about the many thousands of gallons of dilbit spilled by the Trans Mountain Pipeline tanker, you remember reading comments filed on the draft oil spill contingency plans. They spelled out how Washington's oil spill response had not kept up with the latest science and also did not provide for early, aggressive containment and collection of non-floating oil.

The commenters, many from Friends of the San Juans and San Juan Islanders for Safe Shipping, urged Ecology to adopt rules with accelerated time frames and called for expanded resources and equipment to respond to a worst-case spill of non-floating oil. They also pushed for effective wildlife deterrence operations.

They said non-floating Canadian tar sands crude oils should be regulated commensurate with their unique risks and spill response challenges. But fossil fuel companies, shippers, the Canadian government under Trudeau, and Republican legislators all fought those tougher spill response rules. They said a spill was extremely unlikely and all the extra funding for a comprehensive response could not be justified.

You disagreed. But you went along.

Today, years later, you wish you would have fought harder to win the oil spill response rules you knew the people of Washington state and the world deserved.

And, as the rain drove you inside from your Orcas deck, you wondered how you'd explain the Trans Mountain oil spill disaster to your grandchildren.