



**Transcript of Video Interview with Mike McCorkle,  
recorded May 2010.**

This interview is part of Earth Alert's Heroes of the Coast video archive, featuring interviews with leading California coastal activists, past and present California Coastal Commissioners and Coastal Commission staff. For more information, visit [www.earthalert.org](http://www.earthalert.org).

This interview with Mike McCorkle was recorded for the *Stories of the Spill* documentary.

Janet Bridgers (JB): So for the front of the tape, tell us your name and occupation.

MM: My name is Mike McCorkle and I'm a professional seafood harvester.

JB: And in 1969, how old were you and what were you doing at the time of the Santa Barbara oil spill?

MM: I don't know how old I was.

JB: Well, more or less.

MM: I was around 30 years old, 32 years old in 1969 and I was fishing for crabs out by the platforms that they had just installed—A, B & C, Union Oil, fishing probably a quarter of a mile, or closer to Platform A. And I had 80 crab traps in the water out there that I would pull every two days, and take the crabs out and I would take them and sell them twice a week down at Redondo to Quality Seafood.

JB: And what happened? What was your experience out there on the water?

MM: I was at home one night watching television and I saw a little news flash that said there was a little small problem at Platform A and that it was nothing to worry about, everything was under control. So the next morning, I went out to Platform A to pull my traps and there was a lot of problem and things weren't under control and there was this huge bubble of natural gas and oil coming up by the northeast leg of the platform. I'd say the gas and bubble was probably 10 to 15 feet high, just like if you take a hose and hold it underwater and turn it on and make it bubble up. It was similar to that. And there was a boat alongside of it, spraying dispersant on it and that's all they could do. And in the area of my crab pots, there was probably four inches of oil on the water at that time. The weather was okay that day.

I tried to pull my traps up and I couldn't get 'em up through the oil, making my boat go in a circle and trying to make a clear spot in the oil and pull the traps up. I was having a hard time doing that, because the oil would close in before I could get the trap up and the crabs were getting coated with oil.

So I came into the harbor and I told guys here, "hey, there's a big problem out there." And they went, "nah, there's nothing. Don't worry about it." So I went and found out Union Oil Company's phone number and I called them up and said that I was having a problem and they told me I would have to continue fishing out there. If I tied my boat up because of the oil spill, they wouldn't reimburse me for any losses that could occur in the future.

So the next day, I went out again and it was a southeast wind blowing and it was overcast, and I took Dick Smith with me, from the [*Santa Barbara*] *News Press*. And he wanted to take some pictures. And it was not getting choppy, and there was still this problem. They hadn't done anything. They couldn't...they didn't know what to do and they were afraid that the gas coming up was undermining the platform and it was going to fall over. They were worried about that is one thing that I heard.

So we went out and because of the weather condition, I had probably a foot or more of oil on deck of the boat out here. It was coming over the rails as the boat rolled and Dick was hanging up on the rigging here, taking pictures, and oil was coming over the cabin and it was all full of oil on top of the cabin, the sides of the boat, oil outside. And Dick had oil on him. He took a lot of pictures. He was an interesting guy. And I came back in. It was impossible to work in that kind of condition, and I stayed in after that until things settled down, but in the meantime... Well, I did go out another day.

Well, that night, the southeast wind brought the oil into Santa Barbara harbor and it came into the beaches and came onto the harbor and filled the harbor up with oil. Then they hired some fishermen to...they put booms across the entrance to the harbor and the most, best technology they had was pilings, from pier pilings, laid on the water, nailed together, with the rope going from one piling to the other, to keep the oil out. Well, it was so choppy that the oil just went right over the top of the things and came in the harbor and then after that, the next day, they started blowing hay onto the oil with a boatload of hay bales. And they'd clip the wires off the hay bales that hold them together and throw them into the water and shoot this hay out. And it would absorb the oil and some of it washed on the beach and they cleaned it up, and some they didn't. And a lot of it sank to the bottom of the ocean. It sank to the bottom of the harbor, too, in here.

So anyway, what happened is that out there, they started spraying dispersant in state and federal waters. And then they passed a law. They couldn't spray it in state waters, so they sprayed it in federal waters. Well, the current would take it right into state waters, but to make this stuff work good, they ran crew boats back and forth through the oil, to mix it up with the dispersant, which made it sink. And doing that, they cut the buoys off my traps with their propellers, because you couldn't see 'em because they were all coated with oil and low in the water. And so I lost about two thirds of my 80 traps out there.

And then when the weather calmed down and stuff, I went back out and the oil...they kind of got it under control and I started fishing. And the crabs looked beautiful, but what was happening was they were eating the oil that was on the bottom. And shellfish can do that. Lobsters and crabs, shrimp...they can eat oil. They digest it. It just goes right through them. And I would bring them in receivers in the harbor, which then was clean, and take 'em to Redondo and put 'em in their tank, and the whole tank would turn black inside, because the oil was coming out of the crabs at the tank. And so they called me up and said, "you know, we can't buy your crabs anymore because this oil is coming in the tank." And I went down there and they showed me some of the water that they had saved in a jar, and sure enough, it was black all right.

So out of that, I lost my crab market. “Santa Barbara crabs? We don’t want to have those,” kind of like Gulf shrimp. “We’re not going to eat any Gulf shrimp. They’re bad.” But the crabs, they never had one complaint about an oily tasting crab. It was just the idea of what was happening.

JB: You did some work for the oil companies?

[Toby in the background talking about the reflector.]

JB: Toby’s a sailor...sailboat sailor, East Coast. Do you know Charlie Eckberg?

MM: What?

JB: Charlie Eckberg, from GOO?

MM: From Magu?

JB: No?

MM: Maybe. What’s his last name?

JB: E-C-K-B-E-R-G

MM: No. I don’t think so.

JB: Bud Bottoms? Do you know Bud Bottoms?

MM: Yeah, Bud Bottoms and the fishermen didn’t get along too good.

JB: They didn’t. Oh, okay.

MM: They had a couple of problems with Bud Bottoms.

JB: So you did some work for the oil companies.

MM: Well, I had a chance when I came in the first night and the oil was coming in the harbor and they put these booms out, they hired fishermen to go out and guard the booms and tow them around and that was the first time that I’d ever worked for an oil company directly, right for Union Oil. And the pay was \$15/hour for you, your boat and a crewman. And they told me, “okay, we’ll hire you and we’ll...you go over there and stand-by.” And when they tell you to go stand-by, you go stand-by. It means you tie up and you sit there and you wait until they tell you to go do something.

And other fishermen, mostly abalone divers, with small boats that were saltwater-cooled engines, were out by the boom, and the hay was being blown all over the water, and so I just stayed on my boat all night, and the following morning, I went to the guy and said, “hey, what do you want me to do?” And they said, “well, who are you?” And I said, “well, I’ve been standing by over

there.” And he said, “well, I want you to go out there by that boom and push on those booms.” And I said, “nah, I don’t want to do it,” because what had happened during the night is that the abalone boats had sucked the straw up into their intakes and burn up their engines. And these big spikes that were in the pilings, holding them together with rope, as the boats were bouncing up and down, they were poking holes and stuff in them. And for \$15/hour, I’m not going to ruin my boat. So that was the end of my working for Union Oil.

After that, after they got the spill controlled and they put a tent over the leak, where it leaks...it still leaks. It was leaking. There was a seep there before they put the platform in, a natural seep. And I worked for Joe Greco, and we worked for Hood Construction, who put the pipeline out to the platform. And it comes out from down below the Richfield island down the coast there and it’s 12 miles long and it comes out and goes up to the four rigs and that’s how they get the oil ashore. And I was involved in that for three months, and during that time, they pulled out...they usually pull little sections, like four miles, at a time. It has large 800-pound buoys that float it. They’re hooked onto the pipeline with a cable. They’re about 10 feet long, and the buoy’s above the pipe and it gives it flotation so they can pull it out from shore as they weld the sections together up on the land. And then they sink it, and they dive down and they hook the sections together.

Well, they got this idea—the weather was pretty good—that they towed one section out that was eight miles. And they were saying, “oh, we just did something wonderful. We towed this eight-miles instead of four. Look how much time we saved.” And a storm came and the thing started floating away and to save money on the cable swages that were around the pipeline and to the buoy, they put aluminum swages, instead of steel, to crimp it, and the aluminum by that time ate up and the swages popped off and the buoys all floated up and they were floating all over the channel and the pipe sunk on the bottom with a big kink in it. And so they had to dive down, but that section out. Had to go round up all the buoys in the channel and start over again, and so it ended up costing them way more than it would have cost them if they would have done it right.

And I worked on that job and then I was relieved of my duty because I...we were breaking the anchor cables that were getting stuck in the mud and we had to replace them. We had...there was two, four, six anchors that were 10,000 pounds apiece that would move this barge along, and we’d break the cables on the winch when it would get stuck in the mud. And we’d put new cable and the owner of the boat that I worked on would tow the cable over and dump it by the rock island, right where myself and friends of mine fished for gill nets and we’d get our anchors caught in that cable, or our nets, we’re going to lose ‘em. And I told, “nah, don’t dump ‘em there. Go dump it over here.” And he told me he’s going to dump where he wants and he fired me. So that was the end of my job with working for that particular adventure they had there.

JB: And eventually...

[Toby in the background with instructions again re reflector.]

MM: You need another guy, two more hands holding that thing up.

JB: Yeah, we thought we had two more hands, but...

MM: Sunday.

JB: You were eventually were compensated...received some compensation from the oil companies. Tell me how long it took.

MM: Well, what happened was that all the fishermen basically that were fishing in the area and a pretty big area of the channel had damage and stuff and so when it came time for compensation, the first people to get compensated were people who lived on the cliff up above the harbor here on shoreline and they paid them off right away, because oil got on the rocks down at the bottom of the cliff. But they live up on the top of the cliff and it was a bunch of baloney.

The fishermen were the last to get paid. And I think it was about seven or eight months later, they came around and wanted to have some compensation.

And what I had done, as I...I couldn't fish for crabs anymore. I went and fished for halibut with gill nets. I couldn't do that because there was so much straw and oil on the bottom. Wherever I put my nets, they filled up with straw and oil. So I had no income. So when we went to get paid finally, you had to prove your loss. And when I went to a hearing at the Biltmore Hotel, with a lady attorney was there representing Chevron, or Union Oil, I'm sorry, they pulled out all these Fish and Game tickets. When you unload fish, you get a little ticket that shows how many pounds, what day and where you caught it. And they have a record and you have a record. You get it from the fish market. The fish market sends it into the Fish and Game.

Well, what happens is that a lot of them get lost somewhere between the Fish and Game and the fish market. They don't all get there, so they don't have a complete record. And I'd saved all the ones up and I went and I said, "I lost this much money." They pulled 'em out, sheets like the newspaper, full newspaper pages of these tickets and said, "oh, no, you didn't lose that much money. We say you only lost that much," which was about two thirds of what I lost really.

And so we had to negotiate around on that and then they...and my traps, this was for my traps I lost and a loss of fishing from halibut, for a five-year period, previous to the oil spill. So it's where my tickets showed, I made this much, and so I could say that during that period, I would have made probably that same amount of money. They prorated all the traps. "How many are brand new? A brand new one's worth, we'll just say it was worth \$50. Six months old, they're worth \$25." Well, they weren't all brand new. They weren't this...Anyway, they chiseled it down to not very much money. I think I came out of it with \$1500-\$1600 at the end, which was...I put back into gill net, replacing some of my gill net gear that was so full of oil, I couldn't do anything with it anymore. So I didn't really make any money at all. I lost quite a bit of money.

I don't think there was any fisherman that really made money off the oil companies, but as we went into a hearing, they didn't know anything about fishing. They were very ignorant of how people fish, so they were very interested to learn how people fish. And so they would ask, like me, "well, what about abalone diving?"...some other kind of fishing, to try to get information

that they could use against that fishermen. And they would ask other fishermen, “what about gill nets, what about crab traps?” And they were getting this information.

And one thing that was...made me kind of happy is that this woman attorney was pretty hyper, smoked a lot of cigarettes and she was shaking all the time and demanded I answer. And I had a person there that was telling me what I could say and what I couldn't. And she would demand answers, you know, and want to know where people fish. I said, “well, I don't know. And I know where there's some crabs that I could go catch if I had the gear to do it.”

“Where's that? Where is that place?”

And I said, “well, I can't tell you.”

And the guy said, “you don't have to tell her.”

And so, I said, “I can't tell you.”

“You have to tell me.”

And I said, “no, I don't have to tell you.

And she said, “why don't you want to tell me?”

“Because you might have a husband or a boyfriend that's going to put crab pots in my secret spot. So it's my privilege to know where they're at.”

“I can assure you I don't have a boyfriend that has a...gonna put crab pots out there.”

“Maybe you're gonna do it.”

“I'm not gonna do it.” And she got all...

I didn't tell her. And she was all frustrated, and that kind of made me happy because they were using information...there were people giving them information about the way other people fished that were really ignorant and weren't giving them the right information and it was all going to be used against it to save Union Oil from having to pay off a fair claim to somebody.

So really no fisherman...you hear stories about so-and-so made all this money off the oil spill, but nobody really made any money off the oil spill. They would have made more money if they could have kept fishing.

JB: Did you get involved in any of the political activism after the spill?

MM: Well, not really. I mean it was...we...I was around. I knew what was going on. I watched President Nixon come to the beach, when they swept all the sand, brought nice white sand down and he got out of his plane and looked around and said how bad it was, got back in his helicopter

and flew away. That was a big sham. I watched stuff like that. But as far as the things with GOO and stuff, I didn't join GOO. We were in a different thing.

The fishermen have to work in the ocean and the oil companies are there, so they have to work together, and so we weren't working together before. So what we did is we got together a thing called a Fisheries, Oil & Liaison Office, and that's an office that's run by Dr. Craig Fasaro (sp?), who got hired, where the oil companies and then the fishermen have a committee and they sit down and they talk about problems. They work together and they try to solve things so everybody's happy out there. So I was involved in that. I still am on a committee and that was real interesting because none of the oil companies actually talk to each other. They're all separate. Union's Union. Mobil's Mobil. Exxon's Exxon. And they don't talk to each other. They're not friends. And to sit in a room with them and say, "we want to start this committee, this office up." None of them could make a decision. They all had to run out and call back to Houston to get okay to do it. And they were all leery of it.

And so they all called back to Houston and finally...and then they couldn't have anybody in the meeting. The fishermen didn't care, but the oil companies don't want anyone in the meeting that wasn't an oil company or a fisherman. If a newspaper person came, "no, no, they can't come in. This is a secret meeting."

So what came out of it is that they decided to do it and we went ahead with it and now we have a working relationship through the oil liaison office and we have traffic lanes where the oil boats that take people back and forth, the supply boats that run, they run in these traffic lanes and the fishermen don't put stationery gear or fish in the traffic lane. And the oil companies don't go running out of the traffic lane and run over the fishermen's buoys or their nets and stuff. And it works pretty good, because you've got oil traffic running 24 hours a day out there and a lot of stuff going on and we're not having that much conflict with the oil companies.

We had a lot of problems before, in the 50s, late 50s, early 60s, with the oil companies were doing like they do in the Gulf and when they put a platform in, they just dump everything over the side. They don't...they cut pipe railings. They cut stuff and they don't need it, they throw it in the water. Well, we were catching the stuff. I caught plenty of it myself. And so we got together and said, "you can't do that. You know, you have to take it to shore. Don't dump it out here." And so they started doing that and they've been pretty good about it, but we're still catching the stuff from 50 years ago, we're still catching the stuff that they've dumped. And it's a problem to certain gear-types of fishing. But overall, the fishermen have learned how to fish around the oil wells. And we know that this oil well has a sunken mooring buoy right here, or this oil well has got a big snag over here, which is probably something they dumped there years ago and we have these chart plotters that work off of satellites and we know...we mark 'em in there and we go around all this stuff. And so it's working out all right.

If we hadn't had the oil liaison office, and we had no communication between the fishermen and the oil companies, that would be a big problem. And the way it is now with the laws that have come into effect and stuff, the fishermen actually have some leverage to cause the oil companies some problems. There's a rule—OCS9C—that says they can't dump stuff in the ocean and they have to remove things when they go away and they have to do certain things. That's good,

because we can make it so that's enforced and they have to do that. Otherwise, they could just do whatever they want and we'd end up like the Gulf, which is a giant junkyard down there.

JB: As precisely as you can say it, how did the '69 spill affect your life?

MM: During the time of the 1969 spill, when it was going on, wasn't good. We couldn't make any money. Things were screwed up and that was a new experience for us, as well as for them. They'd never had that happen and we were worried that there was going to be future platforms put in and it could happen again. So we learned how to deal with it legally with the oil companies, and so luckily, it's never happened again. They've had a few minor spills that are basically nothing. And we formed also, through Clean Seas, we have a fishermen's oil response team, where they've trained fishermen to go clean up the oil and in the small spills that they've had, which are a few barrels, the fishermen are the ones that go clean 'em up, and it works out real good, so it affected my life for, I'd say, about six or eight months and then it's just like it didn't affect me anymore.

Do I worry that it can happen again? I don't worry a lot about it, because I think that the technology they have nowadays is really superior to what they had in 1969 and the companies themselves see the liability of having a spill and I think they're a lot more careful. It doesn't mean it won't happen again. It can, and if it does, I think that the fishermen...we're going to know how to deal with our part of it, which is...it's going to be a huge loss. When you lose your fishing gear, and you can't go fishing, your income, it's like losing your job and you've got to be able to get compensated for that if somebody's at fault. So if it happens again, hopefully, we'll be dealing in good faith with these oil companies and they'll respond.

I see what's happening in the Gulf and some people are having a good experience out of it and some are having a real bad experience. I think that's typical. If you look at Prince William Sound, the same thing happened up there and it was good for some and real bad for others. And the worst part of it is they like to stall around and half the people in Prince William Sound are dead now, and they didn't have to pay them anything. You can't stall around. It has to be immediate response and the oil companies have to take care of the fishermen and the other people that are working on the ocean. People on land, this may be a little different. They don't get affected. It's interesting that if there's an oil spill here, it won't be like in the Gulf where you have wetlands and stuff. The ones we have here, I think you can block them off real fast with booms and you can keep the oil from going in there and stuff. It's not like the Gulf or it's not like Prince William Sound where you have real strong tides and high and low which could cause a lot of problems, so hopefully, we don't ever see that happen again here. And I think there's a pretty good chance that it's not going to happen again here.

That was a...if you know why it blew out, that was a money-saving measure that they did and if they would have done it the way you're supposed to do it, that would have never happened. And I think they learned a big lesson themselves and it cost them some money to learn that lesson. But that's typical of some companies trying to save money.

JB: If you were talking to a gymnasium full of high school students, what would your advice be to them about how to protect the California coast.

MM: Well, if I was talking to a bunch of high school kids about how to protect the coast, I would probably tell them that first, you have to get the correct information on what the problems are and then you have to learn the laws, what the correct laws are that can cover those problems, because there's a lot of people that are saying there's problems that aren't really problems. And there may be some problems that people are unaware of that they should learn about. So knowledge of the situation...what about the channel? How is it? What's going on out there? What are they doing to protect it? Are some of the protections unnecessary?

I feel some of the protections are unnecessary, unnecessary meaning that they're not going to change anything. It's for protection, but it isn't really going to protect anything. What it does is it affects the livelihoods of the people who work in the ocean and if you look at it, it's political. There's a lot of politics and some politics is good and some politics isn't good. And it's hard for somebody who's a teenager to absorb and figure out what's right and what's wrong, what's good, what's bad about these politics. You can do it, you know. So to me, it's important for 'em to learn that and then they can make their own decision and don't let somebody make a decision for you. You make your own decision based on your knowledge of each situation, 'cause they're all different.

JB: And if Governor Brown or the President called and asked you to be on a blue ribbon commission to protect the coast, what would your top recommendations be, to protect the coast?

MM: I didn't know if Governor Brown was going to do that. I didn't think there was any money to have that. So that means the commission would be doing it out of the goodness of their heart. They wouldn't be getting paid, or maybe the oil companies are going to pay for this commission.

Ask me the question again.

JB: If you were asked to serve on a commission to provide recommendations for the best ways to protect the coast, what do you think your top priorities in terms of recommendations would be, one or two things?

MM: Well, my priorities to protect the coast are probably different than a lot of other people. It depends what...my life is based on making a living off of the ocean, so what I want to see from the ocean is a healthy ocean. If I have a healthy ocean, we'll have healthy fisheries and I'll be able to make a living.

And what's happening is that people are claiming the ocean isn't healthy, there's no more fish. They're closing off areas that don't need to be closed. I'm losing my income. I can't fish anywhere, maybe to the point where I can't go outside this harbor anymore, because I can't fish anymore. And so if I was on this panel, I would speak what I see has happened and what I think out of that whole thing what's right and what's wrong. And that's going to upset a number of people, because basically there's a lot of money involved in doing, closing the ocean. Everybody's making money off of 'em, and it's the crisis industry, as I call it, is coming up with these artificial crises. And they come up with a crisis. To solve it, then they say, "we'll solve it." Their funders pay them a bunch of money. They go supposedly solve the crisis that wasn't a

crisis in the first place and in the meantime, by doing that, you've taken people that are victims of this artificial crisis and put 'em out of business. And that means it's taken away their livelihood, which in some cases...I've seen it happen, where people have died of heart attacks. They've had strokes. There's divorces. It's things that shouldn't have happened at all, because there was no crisis.

And so if I was on the panel, I would speak up that I don't think this is a crisis. I want more proof that this is a crisis. If it is a crisis, and I agree with it, I'd be the first one to say that I agree with it and try to do something to solve that crisis. But I'd say that half of these crises aren't real crises.

[end of interview]