



Transcript of Video Interview with Alan Sanders

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.

Interview with Alan Sanders re Halaco

JB: Hello and welcome to *Heroes of the Coast*. I'm Janet Bridgers and we're here to talk today about a legendary toxic waste dump located next to a very sensitive wetland area in Ventura County—the Ormond Beach wetlands and the Halaco Engineering toxic waste dump. Our guest is Alan Sanders who is conservation chair of the Los Padres chapter of the Sierra Club. Thank you for joining us, Alan.

AS: Good to be here, Janet.

JB: Alan, you have a long history, going back with the site. How did you first become aware of and involved with Halaco and their toxic waste dump.

AS: Well, Halaco is very visible to residents of Pt. Hueneme and Oxnard because it was a really large facility and wasn't very attractive and it was right on the coast. And it also disseminated smog that had a very bad smell, and so people would comment about. There was a lot of speculation as to what was in the pile of tailing that piled up next to the company facility. It's always been a topic of conversation for locals in that area.

JB: It's not just a topic of conversation. As you said, it's very visible. Tell us about visually what the toxic waste dump looks like.

AS: Well, it's supposed to be 750 cubic yards of material, which makes it quite a large mountain. So some people refer to it as Halaco "Mountain." It's 40 or 50 feet high, it's gray material. It's a different color than everything around it, and it blocks the view of the mountains from a large area of wetlands. It's very prominent.

JB: You've been consistently involved for more than 15 years with the Ormond Beach wetlands and this Halaco "Mountain" is immediately adjacent, or in fact, right on top of the wetland. Tell us about your experience in the past with the effects of this company relative to the wetland.

AS: Well, it's really taken a lot of time for people to learn what the effects were, because there was controversy over what the effects were. The company always claimed that there was no negative effect. And there's been a number of government agencies, from the City of Oxnard, to the Coastal Commission, Department of Fish and Game, Fish and Wildlife, the Corps of Engineers and now EPA who have all been involved in trying to determine whether substances that were disposed of at Halaco were toxic or radioactive and the answer that we've gotten recently from Environmental Protection Agency is that there are both. So we now know there are

issues related to heavy metals and some other toxic materials that were piled up in an area right on top of wetlands. And we also know now that there are some radioactive materials as well.

JB: From your experience in the past, Halaco is right across from the Oxnard Industrial Drain and the lagoon. Now the lagoon is an important feature in the Ormond Beach wetlands because a lot of foraging goes on there. But also, it has the berm that is occasionally breached. And now you said you had thought in the past that the berm creates the lagoon during most of the year where the fish live, grow up, the birds feed and occasionally, it is naturally breached. But you said sometimes in the past you thought that Halaco—people from Halaco—might have been trying to breach the berm.

AS: Yeah, there were issues related to that. First of all, what they call the waste management unit, which is Halaco Mountain, is actually placed right in the center of a water feature that historically was open water and lagoon area. So it's surrounded by water and there is an attempt to restore wetlands at Ormond Beach, which is really compromised by the location of this pile of material. As regards the hydrology of the area, there was conflict throughout the 90s over whether the lagoon should be operate as a natural feature, and achieve water levels on its own, or whether people should intercede and try to alter this lagoon feature, so that it wasn't in existence. And there were allegations that company employees were taking actions and no one ever followed up on investigating, so those allegations still are out there, but no one really pursued them to the end.

JB: There's been a lot...when I say "a lot," that's no exaggeration, of legal activity from various agencies at Halaco, but then actions by Halaco back at agencies or individuals. And you have told me in the past that you were part of a lawsuit that was filed in the early part of this decade?

AS: Yes, I helped Environmental Defense Center from Santa Barbara and Lawyers for Clean Water, who had both state and federal lawsuits relative to violations of the Clean Water Act, and some other laws. And they needed people from the community who had some experience on what was going on at Halaco. And so I provided information about there being activities and what I observed, so I was a participant on that level.

JB: One of the prime figures from the Halaco cast of characters is an attorney named Art Fine. Who is Art Fine?

AS: Well, he is a part-owner, who is also active as the attorney for the corporation and he and I were participants in a deposition that was part of the litigation that you asked about. So, for many years, Mr. Fine conducted a number of lawsuits against agencies and individuals who were trying to regulate what Halaco was doing in the Ormond area. So his name is well-known to regulators throughout Ventura County.

JB: Tell us about your experience the day you were deposed by Art Fine.

AS: Well, he's a strong representative of his company. And he had a number of questions about the role of companies that recycle and tried to make a point that his company was recycling aluminum and "don't we want recyclers?" And, of course, I wanted to steer the conversation to

the issues of placing fill in wetlands, altering the flow of waters of the United States, placing toxics and radioactive substances in waters that are shared by people. And so we kind of had a conflict on our point of view and what information we wanted to bring forward.

JB: How long did the deposition go on?

AS: It went on all day.

JB: That must have been very tiring.

AS: It was very tiring, but it was also energizing because it was an opportunity to bring out some issues that are important. And in a small way, that and the work of other people who were deposed, has brought us to where we are today where we have the Environmental Protection Agency, the Regional Water Quality Control Board, Oxnard Fire Department, Ventura County Air Pollution Control District...all interacting with the owners of Halaco and the property now to try to bring this facility into compliance with environmental laws.

JB: Going forward with this situation, we have been...one can see...I mean we have been told there is an enormous volume of toxic material located immediately adjacent to a wetland. The Superfund is chronically under-funded at this point because the federal mechanism for generating funds was not reauthorized. And so, it would rather be a financial miracle if the Halaco heap got moved. But if it doesn't, what tragedy do you see transpiring?

AS: Well, it would be tragedy if the Halaco Mountain was not removed because it's continuing to leach toxics and radioactive substances into a wetlands area. It's home to many endangered species. No one has really ascertained what effect that contamination has had on a whole variety of species. There are some tests made on some fish, but no one was doing tests throughout the 70s, 80s, 90s. So a lot of harm could have been done that just wasn't documented. And there are avian and other species that haven't been tested at all. So this area, which really is in the center of the wetlands really needs to be removed. There's also the harm to people. There are people who allege they have health problems that are related to this, including former employees, people who live close to the facility. There are some people who have expired and their relatives claim there's a connection, and all that needs to be looked into.

JB: We face the threat of rising ocean levels. What would rising ocean levels do to an existing heap right by the wetland?

AS: That's a really interesting question because everybody knows there's a prospect of rising ocean levels and yet, people who are looking at this issue of places right on the coast are looking at it as if it's in a vacuum and it's not going to be affected by this. So, of course, rising ocean levels would mean that there would be an interface of water with this toxic pile, which would certainly have the prospect of contaminating near-shore waters and possibly disseminating out into the Channel Islands area.

JB: Do you think there is any strong local effort—will—yet to prevent that possible harm?

AS: Well, citizens in the area seem to be unanimous in wanting to have this pile removed. But our fate is still in the hands of the same agencies that allowed this to develop in the first place.

JB: We're in the last couple minutes we'll be able to devote to the subject today, but what would you like to see happen?

AS: Well, I'd like to see the pile removed, the area that it's been sitting on dredged down to what it looked like before the facility was placed, which would mean it would be part of the Ormond Lagoon system, and there would be hundreds of different species of wildlife utilizing it and people would really benefit from that.

JB: Thank you for joining us today. Viewers, thank you for joining us.

[end of interview]