



Transcript of Video Interview with Trevor Smith, recorded 2008.

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.

Janet Bridgers (JB): I'm very pleased to have as our guest today Trevor Smith. Welcome, Trevor. Thanks for driving in.

TS: Thanks for inviting me.

JB: Trevor, you're going to tell us about an issue that is just going to get bigger and bigger, and that is people euphemistically call LNG. Now what is LNG?

TS: Liquefied natural gas.

JB: Liquefied natural gas. What does that mean? What is it?

TS: Well, it's natural gas that's extracted in foreign countries and many of those countries are third-world countries, and some of the gas comes from between Australia and Indonesia and some comes off the Sakhalin Island in Russia. And there's vast reserves in Iran and in Asia, and off of Nigeria and different parts of the world. And it's a very light gas that's the type of natural gas that we burn in our homes and industries and the power plants, but to transport it, they've come up with a scheme where they freeze it to minus 260 degrees, which condenses, or shrinks the gas 600 times. So you can put 33 million gallons of liquefied natural gas in a frozen form—in a sludgy frozen form—ship it 10,000 miles from Australia to California and then regasify it by heating it and so basically what you're bringing in each ship is 33 million gallons on average times 600 so you're bringing billions of gallons per shipload to California. And then transporting it through a pipeline into the intercontinental pipeline, or the interstate pipeline and enhancing our gas supply.

JB: Well, that sounds pretty high tech, but let's go back a little bit. What all is natural gas used for? This is probably most people know off the top of their head, but let's just review for a second.

TS: Well, it's not really used for anything until it's converted back into natural gas, so it's just a medium of transporting natural gas in a frozen form and it's basically unusable until it's regasified. So they have to bring it back from minus 260 degrees to room temperature.

JB: And it has kind of a scary past, I hear.

TS: Well, it's been used for over 40 years, and there's been a couple of large incidents. There was one in Algeria... There was one in Cleveland that took out a square mile.

JB: Really? Just a square mile?

TS: Just a square mile. And there was a few deaths, but they play it down because it was a long time ago and technology has improved. But then there was one just a few years ago in Algeria and it was a massive type explosion, killed about 27 people, I believe.

JB: Just 27?

TS: And the proponents for LNG play that one down because it was in a third-world country, foreign company. But it did turn out upon investigation that the pipelines were built by U.S. contractors.

JB: So what you're saying in all of this is that there is rather an explosive quality about this substance?

TS: It could be stated like that.

JB: You could say that. And they've tried, in the past, correct, to create a terminal in Ventura County.

TS: Yes.

JB: What do you know about that?

TS: Well, back in 1977 there was...they tried to site one in Oxnard on the Ormond Beach wetlands and the City of Oxnard got very concerned. There was very little public information about the project at the time and very little public awareness and so the major...I believe it was Mayor Lopez at the time, and the City Council commissioned an independent study on what the worst case scenario could be if a liquefied gas facility exploded. And the analysis was that about 70,000 people could be impacted, either killed or burned, or sunburned, or something like that.

So they decided that it was too close to a metropolitan area for that and then they later decided to locate it up in Pt. Conception.

JB: Now who decided?

TS: Well, I believe it was, at that time, it was probably either the federal energy regulatory...you know, the FIRC, or it could have been the California State Energy Commission, or the both of them working together. I wasn't really involved in the project.

JB: That's quite a long time ago.

TS: I was around.

JB: That's almost 30 years ago.

TS: I was around, and I was surfing in Oxnard in 1977, and I was also surfing up at Pt. Conception and I was familiar with both sites, and everybody up in Santa Barbara was really

heartbroken. There was a time when it was, for sure, going to happen at Cojo Point, and it was all taped off, and you couldn't trespass on it and everybody thought it was basically the end of the most beautiful part of the coast, as far as they knew it, because you wouldn't be able to surf at one of the premier surf spots in California, or get anywhere close to it, so it was a major concern to nature lovers at that time and surfers.

JB: But we got past that one.

TS: Yeah, I don't know the whole story, but there are several things that happened. I believe the project was approved, but then the gas price fluctuated downward and then there was not an economic reason to import gas at that time, and then the permit, I believe, expired. There was also some Chumash Indian tribe that filed some form of injunction. But I think economic price reasons stopped the project, made it not feasible at that time.

JB: I think we should mention there are a couple...a handful of other terminals...of these terminals in the United States at the current time, right?

TS: Four to my knowledge.

JB: And how many on the West Coast?

TS: None.

JB: Which is interesting. And how many proposals now are there nationwide for these facilities?

TS: Well, last I heard was about 44.

JB: 44. So I think can assume it's going to end up happening somewhere, with 44 proposals out there, So back to Ventura County, you said there was a second proposal in the Oxnard area.

TS: Yeah, just about the turn of the century. Sounds funny, but the turn of the century, there was a failed attempt to site another one at Ormond Beach.

JB: This is onshore? Another onshore?

TS: Yes, an onshore facility, and I don't know how large it was. It never got very far because all the environmental leaders and most of the politicians in Ventura County made a stand against it, and I was attended it, and they had such a strong rally that they just withdrew the idea, but it just shows how persistent they are.

JB: So then, what, three years later and there are three more?

TS: Well, there's three... yeah, there's three more in the Southern California "bite." There's the Long Beach proposal, where they want to put it in downtown...in the center of the Long Beach Harbor.

JB: That seems like a very poor choice.

TS: Well, as far as the federal people are concerned, it's a quicker choice because the first thing that they site is that they already successful LNG ports that are in similar situations. They have one in Boston Harbor. So they have a known quantity with a somewhat short proven track record that it hasn't exploded yet. Although I've heard in Boston Harbor, the police chief and the fire chiefs are fit to be tied over the fact that the LNG terminal was placed there in the first place.

The two offshore facilities in Southern California...there's three currently, so there's four total. There's the BHP Billiton, which is the longest standing project, which is in the final stages of public comment for the final impact statement...environmental impact statement, and this is the one the Sierra Club has been mostly involved in because it's the one that's closest to being possibly approved. And this one is located offshore to avoid those onshore impacts, but being located offshore is not a clear-cut path for the federal government to put this one through, because it involves the California coast, so they have to deal with CEQA law, with the Coastal Act.

JB: What's CEQA?

TS: CEQA is the California Environmental Quality Act and it means that you have to thoroughly analyze any impacts and especially cumulative impacts, and as this project stands, there are numerous class one environmental impacts that cannot be mitigated and are also cumulative. And so CEQA law requires that the gas...this gas project would have to have a "statement of overriding consideration," which means that the gas itself is needed more than to protect the environment of California.

JB: Wow!

TS: So that's a sticking point because they have to have a public hearing. They should have a public hearing to determine if the industry estimates that we're running out of natural gas and that this LNG is the preferred supply to solve the problem. And none of that has been held at a public hearing. So I don't see how they can really pass the CEQA challenge, giving the project the status of being more important than protecting our environment.

JB: How far off the coast is it?

TS: It's 13 and a half miles straight off the county line between Los Angeles and Ventura County.

JB: And how far off the Oxnard/Pt. Hueneme area?

TS: 22 miles south.

JB: So would you say that in many ways that that mitigates the danger of a fireball from a leak?

TS: Well, the proponents claim it does, but at first they didn't admit that there was a potential fireball in a worst case scenario. And then they admitted that it wouldn't be more than a mile in diameter. And then the California State Lands Commission asked Sandia Federal Lab to do their own analysis and they have now, in the new EIR, stated that the fireball could be 14 miles in diameter in the worst case. But that's only an explosion at the anchored terminal site, but my opinion of a worst case scenario is if the facility comes loose from its mooring and drifts into the coast and then loses its gas, and then you're talking a 14 mile fireball that's originating on the coast.

JB: In other words, in the case of a storm?

TS: In the case of a storm, or a 7.0 earthquake or a 20-80 ft. tsunami, generated by any number of offshore faults, or long range earthquake faults, as well as terrorist attacks and sheer accidents.

JB: And I hear that Billiton had some projects in the Gulf Coast. Is that correct?

TS: Yes, I found an interesting article... a lot of people have found it... and they had a platform called Typhoon and it's their only venture in the natural gas field in the Gulf of Mexico. And when Katrina came through, the storm blew this supposedly hurricane-proof platform 175 miles from its anchoring spot. So back to my worst case scenario that's not been included in the EIR is the possibility that this could happen again, by some unforeseen circumstance, and this rig could drift. And it's only 13 miles from the coast of Malibu, 22 miles from Oxnard, and 35 miles from L.A. And whatever way the wind blows, or whatever forces are directing it.

JB: Now the terminal that they're proposing, what is it exactly?

TS: Well, it's experimental. It's going to be a floating ship.

JB: Don't all ships float? How is this different?

TS: Well, this is a ship that is turned into a floating terminal and it's almost 1000 ft. long, 14 stories high, and it's going to be anchored in 2800 feet of water approximately.

JB: How far down are they going into... is there bedrock down there? How are they tying it...

TS: I think it's probably sand, which isn't a bad anchoring medium, but it's a complicated project. But it's going to be tethered to the bottom. And then they're going to have another tanker, like a 950 ft. tanker, your typical 33 million gallon capacity tanker be pushed into a side tie with the terminal. So you'll have two. So you'll have this larger terminal with an almost as large ship, and they'll have 250 ft. tugs and it takes about eight hours to push the tanker sideways into side position with the LNG... it's called an SFRU, it's a floating facility to process the gas.

And so you have these two ships tethered. And one of the things that's really frightening to me is that it's on the edge of the southbound shipping lane that goes to L.A. And we all know, L.A. wants to triple their shipping input over the next few years, so the traffic is only going to get worse, and these large tankers and freighters that go to L.A., they travel about 30 knots, which is

closer to 40 mph, and the project is less than two miles from the southbound shipping lane boundary. So, in my estimation, it would take a tanker that went off course three to five minutes to actually strike this floating terminal. And that doesn't give people protecting the terminal much time to make a decision. Do you blow up an oil tanker to stop it from hitting the terminal? It's one of those very dangerous...

JB: Are we to suppose that a situation that you're talking about would be like in case of fog, where visibility was severely reduced?

TS: Well, I think we have modern technology, radar and navigation so advanced that that's not really the issue. The issue would be if a foreign band of terrorists took over a tanker and steered it into it. There'd be very little warning if something like that happened.

JB: What happened with the Exxon Valdez?

TS: Oh, that was just stupidity. The captain was drunk and wasn't on the bridge.

JB: So nobody involved in any of these projects is guaranteed to ever be stupid or drunk.

TS: Well, there's the human factor. That's under accidents. So you have terrorism, you have accidents and you have natural catastrophes, like the earthquake faults or the tsunami. Tsunami is one of the scarier situations.

There was a report recently in the *Malibu Times* about tsunamis and it talked about a federal tsunami, or state tsunami report that was just released. And it turns out that the State of California used the smallest possible wave height as their basis of analysis worst case, which was 30 feet. And most people in California have seen 30 ft. waves breaking on the coast during the El Nino winters. But the new tsunami report says that there's ancient high water marks of 80 feet on certain parts of California and in the natural cycle of things, it's very possible there could be an 80 foot tsunami, which would be totally devastating to an offshore rig.

And one other little thing. There was a U.S. Geological Study on the earthquakes faults of Santa Barbara Channel. It was requested by Lois Capps, our congresswoman. And that was just released at the end of last year. And on the cover page of that, it stated that there's unknown, unmapped faults larger than previously thought, and that LNG facilities would have a 35 to 50 percent chance to experiencing a 7.0 earthquake or greater in the next 50 years, and that....

JB: Wouldn't that...

TS: There's a great percentage of a chance that there would be a major earthquake that could impact an offshore LNG facility in the next 30 years. And in the Oxnard area, it's almost 70 percent and down off Malibu, where the Cabrillo Port would be, it's closer to 30 percent. But on the cover page on the U.S. Geological Survey, it states, on the cover of this report, it states that, based on their findings, LNG infrastructure would not be suitable in this earthquake-prone zone. Everybody seems to be justifying that there's new engineering, and these new pipes would resist these movements.

JB: Now, you mentioned pipes. Let's just assume that all those extreme situations never, ever happened, hundreds of years into the future. Nothing like that every happened. But what about the pipes? Let's talk about the actual pipes themselves.

TS: Well, the pipes are going to have to come 22 miles. Initially they were going to be buried under the ocean floor, but then because of the earthquake survey and the resultant engineering modifications, they decided it was better to lay the pipes on top of the ocean floor, which makes them more susceptible...less susceptible to earthquake damage, but more susceptible to possibly being snagged by a fishing net, or an anchor or just making them vulnerable to a lot more different types of disruptions.

And then when it gets to the coast of Ormond Beach, then the pipeline would go under the beach, under the wetland and then be burrowed through about 20 or 30 miles of farm field areas, through some mountains and meet up in Saticoy, which is where the state pipeline goes, and then have a manifold joining it. And the pipeline's not going to be buried very deeply. In fact, I've heard in some areas it's possibly less than seven feet deep, so it seems like everybody in the world knows where this pipeline is going and if it's not very deep, it seems like just about anybody, if they had a bad intention, could possibly access it.

And also, the whole Oxnard flood plain that the pipeline's running through is also in this, this 30-mile radius of strong earthquake potential, and that we have liquefaction, and that there could be 15-feet of lateral movement in the earth, which could break the pipelines apart.

The industry keeps saying that the pipelines could shut off. Everything's fool-proof and everything, but it is a worry.

JB: Now, there are some other issues, I think, that I've heard about with this, for example, air quality issues.

TS: Oh yeah.

JB: What's that all about?

TS: Well, air quality is the biggest issue—one of the biggest issues. You don't ever want to say that there's just one issue, but it's one of several large issues. And initially the BHP Billiton said that this project was a clean air project, that it was going to save our environment and our air quality and be a big improvement. But as it turns out, it will be the biggest air polluter in Ventura County, and by their own admission, which isn't telling the whole story, but just from the emissions from the ships that are in proximity to the coast and the terminal itself, which has to process this gas from minus 260 degrees back to a normal temperature, will create 270 tons of emissions into the atmosphere.

JB: Is there anything we are familiar with that we could compare that with that's 270 tons. It sounds like a lot.

TS: It would be the greatest polluter in Ventura County. It would be many times greater than Procter & Gamble, that is the individually single biggest polluter. It's about the equivalent of a power plant running, a large power plant, like at Ormond Beach, running fulltime, which they don't.

JB: I see. Okay. Now you've said, you've referred to Billiton a lot. Now what phase of the project are they in?

TS: They're in the last phase of the environmental impact report, the EIR, where there will be... we're in the last 30 days of the whole process. And they'll be about 30 days left for the public to comment formally by writing letters to the State Lands Commission, who is performing the EIR. Then there's going to be a series of public hearings—one in Malibu, a couple in Oxnard, a couple in Santa Clarita. And once this is all wrapped up, then they go into the final deliberative phase of the project where they close the doors again to the public and deliberate on any new information in the public comment. And then they have to produce an environmental impact statement, which is the finished version of the EIR. And they have to show that all of the environmental concerns have been disclosed and that the public's comments, and professional comments have been admitted into the EIR and everything has been answered and that they can justify that the project is environmentally sound enough to go forward.

And BHP Billiton has spent a lot of time and money on this process, and basically what they're telling people is that they've deserved to be given permission, just because of the effort that they put in...

JB: Because of how much they've spent?

TS: Yes, and the time that they've spent, rather than basing it on the science of an environmental impact report.

JB: I hear that their reputation internationally is not too good? What do you know about that?

TS: Well, I started goggling the words BHP Billiton safety, BHP Billiton third-world countries and you come up with a lot of reports that show that they have a history of overriding third-world countries' environmental protection laws, by lobbying directly to the government. And their argument is always that this project is so profitable for the government that you need to rewrite or overlook the environmental protection laws. And curiously enough, this is what they've done in California. They've lobbied over our heads. Initially it was going to comply with CEQA, it was going to comply with California law, but when they started to see that this project wasn't going to be able to conform with those laws, they lobbied in Washington and had the EPA step in to have jurisdiction over the local agencies. And so we're not being afforded any protection from our local air quality control district. They can only comment, but they don't have any regulatory authority. And so this whole process is being approved from Washington and not through our state regulators.

JB: Wow! Is there anybody in Washington you think that is particularly disposed to having this go through?

TS: Well, there's an oilman in the White House who kind of likes it, and he's good friend of Prime Minister Howard of Australia. And I've read that Prime Minister Howard has made quite a few trips to Washington, as well as to Sacramento, at least some of their envoys. And they've lobbied hard on the local, Governor Schwarzenegger's administration and they've also lobbied the Bush administration.

JB: You had also mentioned to me that there's also some trouble that this company has had in Iraq.

TS: Yes, I goggled BHP Billiton Iraq, just out of curiosity, and came up with 850 references to news stories from newspapers around the world disclosing the fact that Billiton violated UN sanctions and are involved in an oil for food scandal. They tried to use the UN Food for Oil agreement, which was to help the people of Iraq. And they used this as a tool to buy influence with Saddam Hussein regime, and later the later government to get access one of the largest oil fields in the world, that's the size of the Bass Strait, that's between Australia and Tasmania. It's about 450 mile diameter area of oil.

JB: We're in the last couple minutes of the program. So, first of all, I'd like you to suggest ways that people are watching, what can they do? How would they find out where the hearings are, or where to write letters?

TS: I think the best thing to do would be to access our website.

JB: You've got a website?

TS: Yes, we've got a really good website. It's the Sierra Club LNG...it's called the Ventura LNG website and it's www.venturaLNGtaskforce.com.

JB: So that's www.venturalngtaskforce.com. I'll repeat that in a moment if you want to get pencil and paper. Trevor, thank you very much for joining us. Viewers, thank you for joining us. Venturalngtaskforce.com. And energy conservation is always your easiest method, but let's go for renewables. Do everything you can to help promote renewable energy and reduce....

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