

OUR OCEAN BACKYARD
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Disaster Averted at Moss Landing

The Santa Cruz end of Monterey Bay faced down a number of environmental challenges in the 1970s. Moss Landing in the middle of the bay faced a different set of issues in the preceding decades. The area has changed considerably from the days when Cato Vierra and Captain Charlie Moss arrived in the 1860s and began to develop what was to become Moss Landing with its pier, fish processing plants and canneries, a whaling station and salt ponds.

Kaiser Refractories built a large plant to extract magnesium from seawater for the manufacture of high temperature bricks for steel furnaces on the inland side of the highway in 1945 and forever changed the face of this little town. Their 31 million gallons per day discharge had very high alkalinity and led to biological impacts in the harbor where they initially dumped their discharge water. The Kaiser plant closed some years ago due to competition from China, however, and is now being used for other industrial purposes.

Another big change came when the Moss Landing Power Plant was opened in 1950. It was originally owned and operated by PG&E and was the largest fossil-fuel-fired power plant in California. Although the plant burned fuel oil for many years, which required regular visits of oil tankers to the bay, the plant converted to natural gas some years ago and also has changed owners several times. The plant uses over a billion gallons a day of cooling water, which is discharged to the bay about 20 degrees above normal.

A major battle was soon brewing, however, at what was becoming an industrial center. In 1965, Humble Oil, a subsidiary of Standard Oil, and the ancestor of ExxonMobil, quietly purchased 455 acres of property with plans to build a large oil refinery and process 50,000 gallons of crude oil daily. Oil would be pumped from tankers anchored offshore in a pipeline across the beach to the proposed refinery.

One of the major attractions for a refinery at Moss Landing was the presence of the deep water of Monterey Submarine Canyon, which extends almost to the shoreline. Humble Oil saw this as an opportunity to bring very large, deep-draft supertankers very close to a refinery rather than needing to transfer oil to smaller tankers, a significant cost savings for them

In the minds of some, the oil refinery would be a key component of what was then envisioned as the “Moss Landing-Salinas Industrial Corridor” that would have stretched from Salinas to Moss Landing, right through some of the region’s richest farmland. An epic battle ensued with thousands of locals lined up on opposite sides of the debate. Those wanting to preserve the clean air and waters of Monterey Bay were battling others who wanted to increase Monterey County’s tax base and diversify the economy.

1965 was a very different time in our region's history, however, and much of what we may take for granted today simply didn't exist or wasn't thought about 57 years ago. NOAA didn't exist and there was no National Marine Sanctuary. The California Coastal Commission was still 11 years away and we had no California Environmental Quality Act or federal Clean Air and Water acts. The first Earth Day, which began to catalyze the environmental movement didn't take place until 1970, a year after the 1969 Santa Barbara oil spill.

The refinery plan outraged some Monterey Peninsula residents, who argued that oil spills, refinery odors and air pollution would harm the bay and its life, ruin the tourist industry, and bring an end to agriculture in the Salinas Valley. J. Prince Warner, the vice president of manufacturing for Humble Oil stated that "We can build a good, clean, sweet-smelling refinery", and that the refinery would help the county tax base and help fund public schools. In just six days the opponents to the refinery collected 12,000 signatures asking the county to reject the application.

A number of retired industrialists, conservationists, and politicians led the fight against Humble Oil Company's plan for the refinery at Moss Landing. Carmel photographer Ansel Adams, and even former Governor Goodwin Knight joined the fight. A fourth of Monterey County residents signed petitions against it, while the Salinas Valley agriculture community was split.

The County Planning Commission opposed it. Although the Monterey County Board of Supervisors, after a 17-hour hearing in December 1965, voted 3-2 in favor of the refinery. Courts upheld the approval, but directors and shareholders of parent Standard Oil got an earful at a subsequent annual shareholders' meeting. In August 1966, Humble dropped the plans and announced that instead it would build a larger refinery in a more welcoming Benicia. If you drive by industrial Benicia today along the East San Francisco Bay shoreline, I think you would agree that Benicia's gain was actually Moss Landing's gain.

Peter Douglas, the late long-time Executive Director of the California Coastal Commission famously said, "*the coast is never saved, it is always being saved*". This is a statement we always need to keep in mind. In these troubled political times we can also exchange the word "democracy" for "coast".