

6. The Oil Boom and the Coast

The oil boom in the Eagle Ford and Permian fracking fields is beginning to have major negative impacts on the Texas coast. Some of these projects are ill-considered and portend major negative changes ahead. Others are more benign and acceptable, at least from my perspective. There are individuals and groups that decry any oil and gas-related development as negative, and I understand why, but I am convinced from forty-plus years of coastal battles that such a focus just will not work in Texas. Instead, I believe that we need to identify the projects that are most destructive to the coast and attempt to stop them.

The worst situation to my mind is the potential onshore oil export facility at Harbor Island just inshore from Port Aransas. The Port of Corpus Christi is proposing this project that will require the deepening of the Port Aransas channel to 75 feet as well as potentially expanding that channel to the northern shoreline of Corpus Christi Bay. A deeper channel at this location will bring more salinity into Corpus and Aransas Bays, further negatively affecting an area that has already been severely negatively affected by impact of Choke Canyon and Lake Corpus Christi reservoirs that have led to Nueces Bay being declared essentially ecologically dead. To make matters worse, the Port is also seeking a wastewater discharge permit for a desalination facility that is proposing the discharge of highly saline “reject” water directly into the Port Aransas channel used by countless larval and juvenile shrimp, crabs and finfish. To my mind, this reject water is not suitable for disposal into an extremely important fish and shellfish migration zone, but that is what is currently proposed.

Alternatives exist that would reduce these impacts significantly. It is possible to construct offshore mono-buoys to export oil and gas. Several such mono-buoys have been proposed for the Texas coast, and I believe these offshore facilities to be much better from an environmental standpoint. Similarly, the salty reject water can be discharged offshore into much less important fish and shellfish migration areas.

Texas lacks effective leadership on coastal impact issues. The truth is that it is up to individuals and groups to take up the fight. In Port Aransas, a citizens' group has formed called the Port Aransas Conservancy, a group dedicated to protecting fish and wildlife resources as well as the life-style of Port Aransas. This group is in a bona fide David vs. Goliath fight with the Port of Corpus Christi and needs help from all of us concerned about the coast. They are opposed to both the discharge of reject water into the channel at Port Aransas as well as the plan by the Port to deepen the channel at Port Aransas to 75 feet to create a deep-water facility on Harbor Island not far from where the ferry lands. Please visit their web site at <https://portaransasconservancy.com/> and make a donation. They need our help, and we all need them to succeed.

This is not the only problem that is occurring because of the available of oil and gas. There are numerous chemical plants that have been proposed or are under construction due to the large amount of natural gas now available at relatively low cost. The world's largest ethylene cracker is proposed for the Portland area on Corpus Christi Bay and is being opposed by Portland Citizens United and Texas Campaign for the Environment. Given that the air permit is required for construction, that is the most important permit to

oppose in order to prevent the plant from being constructed, and a contested case hearing is underway at this time. In addition, a wastewater permit application has been filed proposing the direct discharge of treated effluent into the Corpus Christi Bay system and discharge of stormwater into Copano Bay. This is another important potential impact to Corpus Christi and potentially Aransas Bays, adding to the cumulative risk to these bay systems.

Rumors abound about a new facility to be located near Collegeport which is located on the eastern shoreline of Tres Palacios Bay across from the town of Palacios. This is a very important area for migratory waterfowl, with the Clive Runnells Family Mad Island Marsh Reserve of the Texas Nature Conservancy being just to the south along with Texas Parks and Wildlife's Mad Island Wildlife Management Area. Similarly, whooping cranes were observed using Oyster Lake immediately south of Collegeport during the winter of 2017-2018.

Similarly, liquified natural gas export facilities are being proposed at numerous locations including the Port of Brownsville in far south Texas which is among the most environmentally sensitive locations on the Texas coast. Here, the Laguna Atascosa National Wildlife Refuge and the habitat of the endangered ocelot are immediately adjacent to the port. Generally, LNG export facilities have performed well along the Texas coast, but they do take up land that can be important habitat. The bottom line is that this "last boom" of oil and gas industry is beginning to take a toll on a coastline that has been heavily impacted over the years. With a few notable exceptions, like the demise of Nueces Bay and the superfund sites on Lavaca Bay and in the San Jacinto River, our bays and estuaries have

emerged reasonably strong. That positive assessment will continue only if we demand that the worst of these projects not be permitted.

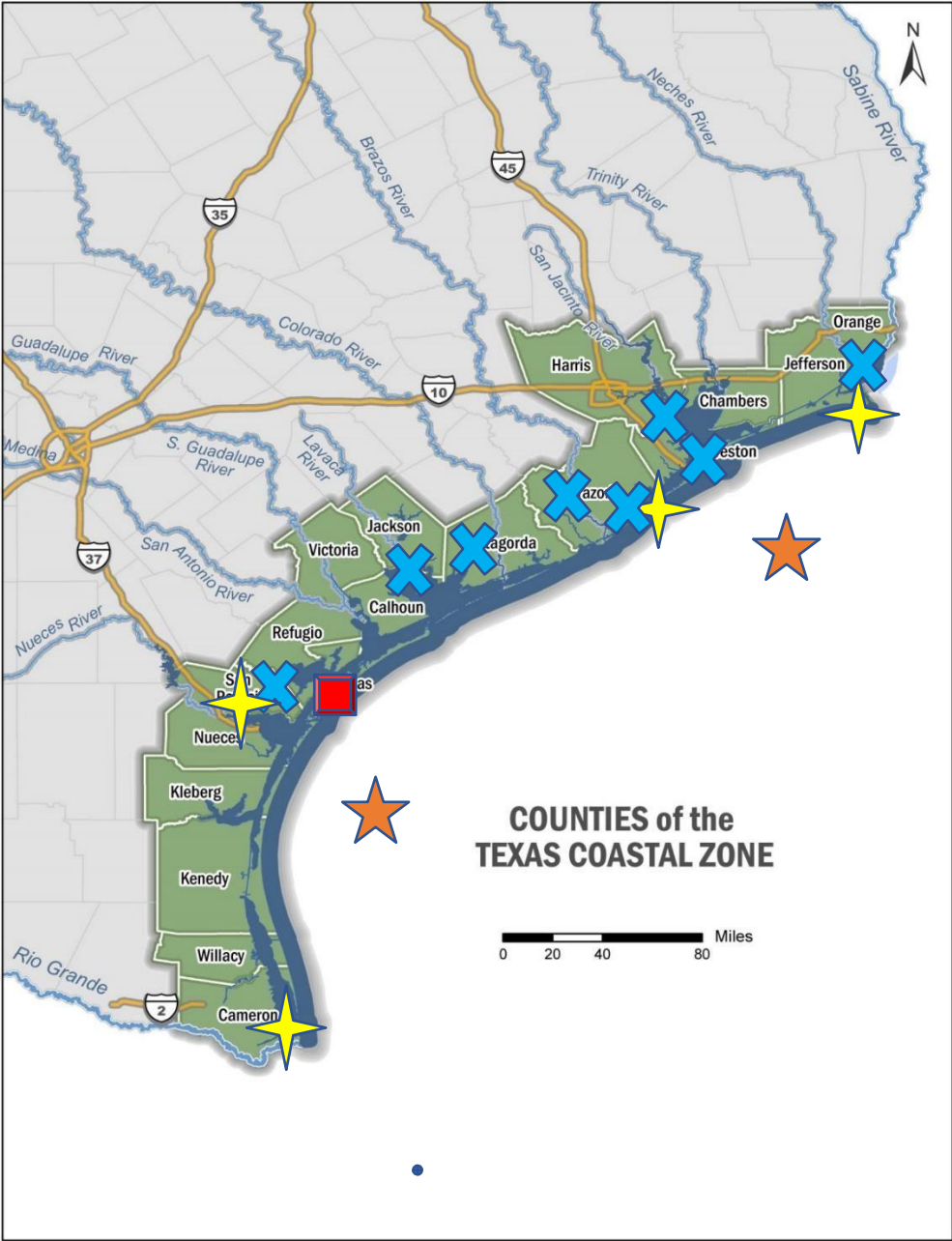


Figure 6. Sites of major proposed petrochemical expansions. Orange stars are proposed offshore oil export facilities, red square indicates proposed onshore deep-water oil export facility, yellow four-pointed stars are proposed LNG export

locations and blue X connotes areas of permitted and/or proposed petrochemical expansion. Base map by Christina Walsh from *A Texan Plan for the Texas Coast*. Locations based upon various reports and mapped by Jim Blackburn.