ENVIRONMENTAL DATA GOVERNANCE INITATIVE

ETM SBU 019

Transcript of an Interview

Conducted by

Katherine Kulik

(With Subsequent Corrections and Additions)

INTERVIEWEE: James Michael Sickles

INTERVIEWER: Katherine Kulik

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INTERVIEWER: Your gender, ethnic identification, and age.

INTERVIEWEE: I'm 69. I guess I would be considered an other white Caucasian, and male.

INTERVIEWER: Okay. And just again for background, if you were willing to tell me just a little bit about your education and profession, I would love to just get a sense of sort of leading up to your first job what education you had.

INTERVIEWEE: Mm-hmm. All right. I've had a varied career. I have a bachelor's in geology, and I got that in 1970. And then I continued on and I got a master's degree in geology in 1974. And that then led to my employment as a geologist primarily in exploration for minerals and petroleum. Then that business fell apart and I went back and I got a master's degree in architecture in 1988.

INTERVIEWER: Oh, wow.

INTERVIEWEE: And then – you've got to change things, right?

INTERVIEWER: Okay.

INTERVIEWEE: So I did architecture for roughly five years. And found that it's very difficult to make a living in that field, even if you're good at it.

INTERVIEWEE: And then I returned to the field of geology doing environmental geology. And so I started that in 19- – let's see here. I actually pulled out a resume to remember all these things.

INTERVIEWER: Oh, thank you for doing that.

INTERVIEWEE: Because it tends to get tortured.

INTERVIEWER: I actually studied geology in undergrad, as well. So definitely have a –

INTERVIEWEE: I still am very happy I got it, but it's just terrible for employment. And so I finished the architecture business in 1991, and then I went back into the environmental geology business working for a few different consulting firms. And then in 2002 is when I started work with EPA.

INTERVIEWER: Okay.

INTERVIEWEE: Mm-hmm.

INTERVIEWER: And what was, I guess, so you said you were in school and it sounds like you've definitely done a variety of things.

INTERVIEWEE: Right.

INTERVIEWER: What other jobs did you have before coming to the EPA?

INTERVIEWEE: I worked for approximately six years as an exploration geologist in minerals, primarily uranium.

INTERVIEWER: Oh, wow.

INTERVIEWEE: And I was working for Atlantic Richfield company, one of the big oil companies. Then that business fell apart, which they tend to do in this economy. And then I moved into petroleum exploration. And so I did petroleum exploration for the next roughly seven years with that same company. And then the last two years of that process I wound up going to

work for a smaller oil company out of Texas. And then the entire oil industry crashed in the early to mid '80s, and that's when I went back to architecture school.

INTERVIEWER: That's an interesting background and combination of things.

INTERVIEWEE: Well, and it's one of those things you kind of like doing different things and you look at it, and in many aspects, actually, some of the stuff you do in geology is analogous to what you do in architecture. And one of the things beyond just the income aspects of architecture was that I found that I was missing the technical aspect that I had been able to enjoy in geology. And that's really what brought me back into the environmental field. And so I did, when I was working in the architecture business, I worked for a small firm that did primarily hospital remodels. And then after realizing for a few years this just wasn't going to pay the bills, then I went back into the environmental bit.

INTERVIEWER: That's interesting.

INTERVIEWEE: You've got to be adaptable if you're a geologist.

INTERVIEWER: Yeah. You're always working with changing natural resources, and you have less control –

<T: 10 min>

INTERVIEWEE: You've got to move it around. We always joke when a bunch of geologists get together how flexible are you on what are you going to do next time?

INTERVIEWER: Who knows? Yeah […]

INTERVIEWEE: Yeah.

INTERVIEWER: So I guess then when you started your work at the EPA, how did you find that job? And what brought you there? And who did you work for when you first came?

INTERVIEWEE: Well, essentially I was working in the environmental consulting business for a large environmental consulting firm called Petrotech EMI. And we were involved in working in cleaning up old navy bases in the San Francisco Bay area. And I had interacted with the EPA several times over the course of that job. And I had a friend from way back in undergraduate school who actually worked for EPA. And he told me they had an opening as a project manager at Superfund. So then I applied and was able to get that position starting in 2002 working as a project manager and Superfund.

INTERVIEWER: Superfund? Okay.

INTERVIEWEE: Mm-hmm.

INTERVIEWER: And where did you say location-wise that was?

INTERVIEWEE: This is in region nine, so that's the San Francisco office of the EPA.

INTERVIEWER: All right. Okay. You are still in California, now?

INTERVIEWEE: Yes. I'm still in California.

INTERVIEWER: Great. And so I'm jumping ahead a little bit just to get a broad overview of your background before kind of diving into some more specifics. You started

with them, you said, 2002 as a Superfund? Did you work in that the whole time you were at the EPA?

INTERVIEWEE: Yes. I've been in – that was the entire – I was with EPA 13 years and all of that was spent within the Superfund division here in region nine.

INTERVIEWER: Okay. Great. And so I guess there's a lot – 13 years is definitely a lot – of time to see various, I guess, people that you're working with as well as presidential transitions. When you first got to the EPA, what would you say your sort of general mindset was and how your division operated when you first started?

INTERVIEWEE: It was generally – the Superfund, particularly as a project manager, has a fair amount of technical involvement.

INTERVIEWER: Okay.

INTERVIEWEE: You do get involved with policy as far as implementing what the Superfund law requires, and you do work with a lot of lawyers because Superfund has a fair proportion of enforcement work involved. And but basically the folks that you worked with were very dedicated. They certainly were, in most cases, very technically talented. And the management, which I worked with, which could be what they call a branch chief, was middle-level management, and they were always very supportive and seemed to be technically relatively sharp.

INTERVIEWER: Okay. Well, you told me just a little, but can you describe your job and what your specific role within the agency there was?

INTERVIEWEE: Yeah. If you are a manager in the Superfund program, what you are is you direct the oversight for either the investigation or the clean-up of a contaminated hazardous waste site.

INTERVIEWER: Okay.

INTERVIEWEE: And so what you do is you work with government contractors. They investigate the contamination on the site, try to determine what impact it might cause, what is the risk, and then ultimately what, how can you clean it up? And if you have a site that's just starting – let's say it's just been brought to the agency's attention – then you will be involved with the lawyers when they get into who owned the site, who has the liability for this site, and can you make them pay for the work? Just what […] it does. And so you have a lot of interaction with your lawyers and other agency folks.

Like you'd have people you worked with at region nine within Superfund who would help you determine the risks from a particular chemical, let's say. So if you had, we always joked about those that have petromethyl death. Okay. How much petromethyl death do you have to worry about versus can you let it go by? And then you would go back and go to your companies and say, "Our lawyers tell us you're responsible. We think this needs to be investigated. We think this needs to be cleaned up. You, unfortunately, are on the hook." And then you get into lots of lawyers arguing

INTERVIEWER: That's interesting.

INTERVIEWEE: Mm-hmm.

INTERVIEWER: Just to give me a background, so for the teams that you were making up, I guess, you said you were project manager –

INTERVIEWEE: Yeah.

INTERVIEWER: You were working with lawyers. You were working with the companies. How big were these teams approximately? And sort of what was the breakdown by lawyers versus other positions?

INTERVIEWEE: Well, EPA has teams in the aspect that you would work with another. Let's say an environmental engineer would help you when you're trying to evaluate ways to clean up a site. And you would also work with what they call a risk assessor who is usually a Ph.D. in risk assessment who looks at the chemical contaminations and tells you that the current research standards tell you that it needs to be cleaned up to this level

INTERVIEWER: Okay.

INTERVIEWEE: You would also work with lawyers. That's part of the team. In other words, what can we do to get the companies to do it? And then you worked with community outreach people, because you have a lot of interaction with the public. And so in that case, your actual kind of team that you work with – and in the government it's not quite as formula, you know, it's kind of strictly set up kind of system. But you'd probably have, let's say six or eight people, depending on your site. Like if you had a site that had a lot of ecological issues, you would work with an ecological risk assessor in addition to a human health risk assessor.

INTERVIEWER: So there would be some positions sort of based on what they need for that particular site, as well?

INTERVIEWEE: Yeah.

INTERVIEWER: That makes sense.

INTERVIEWEE: Yeah. And then when I was managing teams, I managed teams in the environmental business. Particularly when I was working for Petrotech EMI, there I would – in some cases, I was working on a large investigation for military facilities – I had teams of up to 25 people that I would manage. So I kind of had a lot of kind of work as a team leader kind of thing there.

INTERVIEWER: You said Petrotech? Was that with private business, then?

INTERVIEWEE: Yes. That was private business, environmental consulting with private business. Mm-hmm.

INTERVIEWER: My mother actually used to work for Petrotech for a very short time.

INTERVIEWEE: It was a good company. It's still around. But it's – all those companies tend to kind of go through phases as far as size, and what they're focusing on. And it's the typical corporate America thing. It was the same thing when I worked for –

INTERVIEWER: Exactly.

INTERVIEWEE: – exploration. It was kind of like where is the money? And it's like maybe we'd like to do this, but we can't afford to do this. And Duh, duh, duh, duh. So, yeah. I understand.

INTERVIEWER: Yeah. With just getting the sizing, finish up that question, you said six to eight people on average? I guess, obviously, that can vary.

INTERVIEWEE: Yeah. Within EPA. Because as a project manager you're kind of the lead contact person. And so you work with these other specialties, but you do also work quite a bit with contractors. And so a contractor will have a lead

person. You would work with them and say, "This is what we need to have done." And then he may have ten people who help him do that. But you really only interact with him and then maybe a deputy, that kind of thing.

INTERVIEWER: That makes sense, though. But you're definitely acting as the point person for, as the project gets done?

INTERVIEWEE: Yes. Yes. Yes.

INTERVIEWER: Great. So I guess going towards the beginning of your career again, given that we're trying to just get a sense of transition as well as the structure of the EPA –

INTERVIEWEE: Right.

INTERVIEWER: When you first started you told me a little bit about your position and location. I guess, when you first started, what was the basic mission? And you already told me about this, but I'm just asking again. But how did you see the mission of the Superfund fitting into the agency's overall mission?

INTERVIEWEE: Well, at that time there was actually – this was underneath the Bush administration. And the administrator for region nine. I think his name was Wayne Nastri. Their main focus – and one thing I have felt throughout all this time is – a lot of the kind of emphasis on programs, certainly the national emphasis comes down from above. Like in the past with the Obamas you were looking at clean air issues. You might be looking at water issues. They would fund Superfund, but Superfund wasn't as high up on the list as, let's say, climate change.

INTERVIEWER: Okay.

INTERVIEWEE: But when I was doing the work when I first came on board, Superfund might be a little bit higher. Then I think because California and the interaction between the states in each region have a very strong impact on what happens at the working level. California is very concerned about clean air issues. So that tended to be the main agency's point. So when you're doing Superfund work, one of the things you have to do is say, "Is my site impacting the air quality?" So that would be one thing that you would look at is the pencil emissions and stuff like that.

If it was in another state – like I worked in sites in California, I've worked in sites in Arizona, I worked in sites in Nevada – each one of those states has a different kind of a presence. And one of the things the EPA always – and they may not talk about it a lot – but the interaction at the federal level versus state's rights is a very big interaction.

<T: 20 min>

INTERVIEWER: I was going to ask you about that. That sounds like it's very —

INTERVIEWEE: Yeah. Oh, yeah. It is very relevant. At leastwise, it is in region nine and I suspect it is in all the regions. So what you see at the working level you would always get good funding, you get good staff. But one of the thing that always impacted clean ups and Superfund is you would get to the point where you have the site worked out, you know what you need to clean it up, and then it's do you have the money to clean it up?

And the budget has always been tight in Superfund after the CIRLA tax went away and it was never – or Superfund tax went way. And it was never reinstituted. So the money to clean up a haz waste site in the United States all comes out of the general budget and appropriations, which then means if the folks in Washington are allocating the resources, they naturally are going to spend more money on a site that's oozing green nastiness in south central LA than they are a mine site way up in the middle of nowhere Sierra Nevada because of the impacts.

INTERVIEWER: Yeah. They'll focus on the places with more population.

INTERVIEWEE: Yeah. Exactly. And so if they come back, they say, "Okay. We know it needs to be cleaned up. Can we do it in phases?" So then maybe instead of doing it all in two years, you say, "Can I do this part this year? Can I come back and do this part next year and make sure that nobody gets into it and it's not going anywhere making it worse?" And it's usual –

INTERVIEWER: And that's because of the budget, partly?

INTERVIEWEE: That was budget. That was budget considerations.

INTERVIEWER: All right. So that was definitely then affecting how you had to do the work?

INTERVIEWEE: That was impacting that, yeah. Exactly.

INTERVIEWER: And you said that that was, the money from the Superfund comes from the general budget.

INTERVIEWEE: Yeah.

INTERVIEWER: Just sort of make sure that I am clear on this. None of the budget comes from states for that?

INTERVIEWEE: No. Well, what the states do have to pay, which is part of the states' rights heartburn, is when they passed – The state doesn't have to pay for the initial clean-up of the site.

But once a site is in what they call operationally functional – in other words, you've got a remedy. Let's say you have contaminated groundwater, and it's going to take you 50 years to clean up the groundwater. You've got to pump it, treat it every year. EPA will cover the installation of the system until it's up and running, and then for the next 30 years EPA will pay 90 percent of the cost. But the states are on the hook for the other 10 percent. So when you're cleaning up a site, if it's very expensive, it may mean a site is taking on a financial obligation to spend a couple of million dollars a year for 30 years.

INTERVIEWER: Wow.

INTERVIEWEE: And if they don't have the funds, what you get into is a gray argument on is it ready to go and do I really have to pay this?

INTERVIEWER: Yeah.

INTERVIEWEE: And so there's a lot of that back-and-forth.

INTERVIEWER: I was going to ask – that's actually relevant, I feel like, as a point. What do you do when the state doesn't really want to contribute? Have you had that happened to you?

INTERVIEWEE: Yes. Well, what we've run into is I haven't seen or head them, and I certainly didn't experience them refusing. But what they would do is they would come back and say, "Well, your remedy is too active. It costs too much. Isn't there

a better way to do it that's passive that costs less money?" And sometimes there is. A lot of times there isn't. And then you get back and forth in this kind of argument. Like, "Well, do we really have to do it? What about this?" And so you get a lot of waffling. [Laughter] And you would get things – because you have to kind of do a final inspection with your state counterpart to say it's up and running – and it would just never be available for a few months.

INTERVIEWER: Oh, wow. So they actually just put in—

INTERVIEWEE: There's bureaucratic stalling.

INTERVIEWER: Oh, funny. It's not funny, but […]

INTERVIEWEE: It's two big bureaucracies. This is what always drives me nuts when I read the press. They make it sound so simple.

INTERVIEWER: If you can't find me, you can't hold me accountable.

INTERVIEWEE: That's exactly right. And so we have – I encountered that issue working with California. Arizona, by the time I moved out of there was when they changed administrations and became very conservative. They didn't even want to talk to you. Nevada never wanted to talk to us, but kind of got drug into it begrudgingly because their citizens complained too much. But Nevada always had issues. They hated the word Superfund.

INTERVIEWER: Wow.

INTERVIEWEE: So Nevada is a very difficult state to work in for any kind of environmental issues.

INTERVIEWER: Actually, I'll come back to the question on Nevada because I'm curious just what makes it difficult.

INTERVIEWEE: Okay.

INTERVIEWER: But were there any, I guess, just because this is really, I feel like, interesting to me with the battle between states and federal –

INTERVIEWEE: Yeah. Oh, yeah.

INTERVIEWER: Like how you – figure that out?

INTERVIEWEE: Yeah. Mm-hmm.

INTERVIEWER: Potentially relevant. We're not exactly sure, of course, what's happening yet, but given that some states, like you said, they're more behind it than others.

INTERVIEWEE: Okay.

INTERVIEWER: When you said people would stall and just not be available, were there any cases where you really had to step in to handle that for?

INTERVIEWEE: Eventually it would –

INTERVIEWER: Hold them accountable?

INTERVIEWEE: What it would be is you would go back and forth and back and forth, and then finally after, let's say, 6 months, 12 months, you can finally drag them to the table. They knew they had to do it, and if they didn't have a cheaper way to do it, then they were kind of stuck. But they could be very resistant until you kind of forced them into that corner. But it was just kind of more of a continuing discussion to finally reach that point.

INTERVIEWER: What would happen if they just didn't do it?

INTERVIEWEE: Then, I'm not sure because under the Superfund law, the states are required if they agreed for a Superfund site to be put on the national priority list – in other words to be made a quote Superfund site – then contractually they are required to do it.

So and I don't know if any state has actually reached that outright point of saying, "No. I ain't going to do it."

INTERVIEWER: I guess that makes sense just –

INTERVIEWEE: Because it gives them bad press.

INTERVIEWER: […]

INTERVIEWEE: Yeah. Now, what happens in the future, one can only say, "Who knows?" But it has become, I think, more of an issue with the agency as more and more of these sites mature and they reach the point where the operations costs have to be shared. And so if states have limited budgets and stuff like that, then all of a sudden it becomes a much bigger case for them.

INTERVIEWER: Hmm. If all of a sudden they decide they don't want to pay any more kind of deal?

INTERVIEWEE: Yeah. It's like some states – and Nevada was like this when I worked on it – was incredibly resistant to having any site listed in their state as a Superfund site.

INTERVIEWER: Because they knew that they would be on the hook for that 10 percent?

INTERVIEWEE: They'd be on the hook for that. And then not only that, Superfund sites in the press have a stigma.

And one of the sites I worked on was in southern California. It was a mercury mine. And it was down next to a kind of rapidly developing wine region. [Laughter] And one of the public meetings with the city councilmen as they were getting ready to announce this was going to be a Superfund site – even though the state had asked EPA to do it, as well – the councilmen said, "What do you mean, we have a Superfund site in the new wine country?"

INTERVIEWER: Wow.

INTERVIEWEE: So they're real touchy about this.

INTERVIEWER: Hmm. So even like in that case the local government was a little bit shocked?

INTERVIEWEE: Yes. And they were certainly not behind it as much. But there were other community members who were. And then at the state level, they knew this was a site had a lot of problems, and it actually impacted a large reservoir with fishing and people's use in the general area. And they didn't have the money and resources so they wanted EPA to go ahead and list it and help clean it up.

INTERVIEWER: Wow. Without, I guess, dissing on Nevada too much, I know you said that they were a problem state in some ways –

INTERVIEWEE: Oh, yeah.

INTERVIEWER: Do you think –

INTERVIEWEE: Yeah.

INTERVIEWER: Do you think – I don't want to get too political, either, but how do you think that politics in that state contributed to that?

INTERVIEWEE: A great deal. What you had was the state of Nevada is very small and it's reasonably rural. It's very conservative. It's predominantly Republican, although you do have Democratic strongholds down in places like Las Vegas. But as a result of the state and the way it's formed, it was always kind of the wild west is still alive in Nevada. And it's a state that relies heavily on gambling and mining. That's where the revenues come from, from the casinos and the mines.

INTERVIEWER: Right.

INTERVIEWEE: So if you're doing anything that involves a mining operation, even if it's an old abandoned mining operation, the mining companies in Nevada usually call up their local representatives and go, "What do you mean, you're letting the federal government do something here?" And so there's a great deal of political pressure that impacts anything that you do in the environmental business in Nevada.

INTERVIEWER: That's an interesting dynamic with people in the rural area thinking, they've been doing this for a while, like why should I change now? […] question a little bit.

INTERVIEWEE: Yeah. And once—one of the sites I worked on you had a community group who is still active that was pushing to get something done to clean it up. And then the local politicians were always trying to push us out like we're terrible. And then they kept hoping that another mining company would come in and re-mine the deposit and clean it up in the process, which almost happened, but then the copper market fell apart. So it's still sitting there contaminating the world. So you have a lot of differing groups going on back and forth within the political arena. So there was a whole lot of –

<T: 30 min>

When we would have what we'd call technical advisory groups, which involved the community plus the local politicians, plus there were two Indian tribes involved, you'd have 25 people in a room arguing over technical issues.

INTERVIEWER: So lots to do as project manager? I can see there's some —

INTERVIEWEE: Oh, yeah. I mean, we would joke. You had 10 percent technical and 80 percent political. It was terrible at times.

INTERVIEWER: Wow. Wow. Another question I think I'll bring in now just because it feels relevant, with the science, in particular. So what kind of scientist or science were most important to the work? And I guess you're saying a lot of it is political, but how do you feel the science background was being treated by members when you were working on these projects, both at the beginning and throughout your career, if there were any notable examples?

INTERVIEWEE: Working on a site like that, you work a lot with geologists. You work a great deal with chemists, geochemists. You work a great deal with the biologists who are basically the risk assessors. They usually have public health degrees, or something like that. You work with ecologists in trying to

determine what impact on the local birds and critters and that kind of thing you have. You work a lot with engineers. You're kind of going, "Okay. Looking at the world of environmental cleanup, how do you take care of this? And what kind of cost would it be? And what are the kind of interactions you have to worry about kind of thing?" So you would work with those folks.

The level of technical kind of scientific work tended to be, I think the base level was all reasonably good. But if you're talking about did somebody get into more science than another site, that tended to be driven by the project manager.

INTERVIEWER: Okay.

INTERVIEWEE: In other words, if you were a project manager like me, I've been in science for years. So I would get more kind of science techno geeky [Laughter] than somebody who maybe had a background in environmental policy that was working as a project manager. And they might rely on their contractors more. And then in my case, I would certainly rely and work with my contractors, but I would push them to do more.

And then within EPA as an agency, they have some pretty good technical resources that are at a national level, but you have to kind of talk to them to get their help. So I would contact people in a national laboratory in Ada, Oklahoma, who would help us with some groundwater issues. There were some excellent people there. I had a site that had a lot of radiological issues. So we had rad contamination. I would work with another lab to help me there. So you would do a lot of that kind of outreach stuff.

INTERVIEWER: And they were pretty willing to work with you guys?

INTERVIEWEE: They were good. You'd still have to go, "Gee whiz. This was a big site. You've got to help me." And they kind of waffle, waffle, because they had too much work to do. [Laughter] And then you'd get something there and they'd kind of go, "Where are my […] are going? Well, we're redoing this. But all of a sudden there was this big panic from Flint, Michigan." So, but you do have priorities with them.

INTERVIEWER: Competing for their attention?

INTERVIEWEE: Yeah. You compete for their attention. But when you've got their attention, the people that I worked with were excellent. They were some of the best in their field.

INTERVIEWER: The cross transitions, and I know – so you would have had Bush I, Clinton, and then Bush II?

INTERVIEWEE: No. I just had Bush II going into Obama.

INTERVIEWER: Oh, I was—

INTERVIEWEE: Yeah.

INTERVIEWER: Bush II

INTERVIEWEE: No, that's fine. Yeah. Because I started in 2002, so that would have been the end of Bush II. And that, because he had appointed a regional administrator at the time who was Wayne Nastri. And then Obama came in and then they had the administrator who recently resigned last year, Jared Blumenfeld.

INTERVIEWER: Okay.

INTERVIEWEE: So it's basically just that one transition.

INTERVIEWER: So with the shifts from Bush II to Obama, do you think the ways in which your project management and ability to manage projects and bring in scientists changed at all? Or do you feel like it was more up to the project manager?

INTERVIEWEE: I think it was, you know, the focus on the, at the upper levels, let's say at the regional administrator for the whole region. They may spend a lot more time and attention underneath the Obama administration on working with clean air and climate issues and stuff like that. What I did see in that transition as you got into the Obama era and further, there seemed to be a great deal more focus on contracting issues. And I'm not sure if that's because they had had problems before, but they did a lot more of requiring folks to take training on how to do government contracting and how to be the official person, and do the right paperwork, and make sure that everybody did things correctly.

INTERVIEWER: Huh.

INTERVIEWEE: And the other thing that I did notice – because on a couple of my sites I got involved in talking to the local press about what's the problem and stuff like that – is underneath the Obama administration there actually seemed to be more focus on if you were talking to the press making sure that you have a community outreach person on the phone with you at the same time. And I think they were just real sensitive to you misstating something that could be used against them politically.

INTERVIEWER: Can you explain that more, you think? Why did they have a community outreach?

INTERVIEWEE: Well, I think because they were being beat up on by Republican. For as long as Obama was in there. It's kind of like if you said something that could be taken out of context, then it could be used against him. So they were very careful about the wording, and stuff like that. They –

INTERVIEWER: So the community outreach person – sorry. Go on.

INTERVIEWEE: Exactly. The community outreach person would be in there. And you would know through working there and training and stuff there were certain questions you avoided and you gave them to the community outreach person to answer.

INTERVIEWER: So this would be a member who is informative on the project and meant to be a liaison?

INTERVIEWEE: Yes. Yes. Yes. They're an EPA person. Usually each region has an office with a few people on that. They have a general summary of the site. You would talk to them beforehand and say, "Okay. This reporter wants to talk to us about X, Y, Z." And they didn't necessarily suppress, like you said. But they were always in there. And they certainly, they were the ones who put together any kind of press releases and stuff like that.

INTERVIEWER: Would their … I guess these community outreach liaisons, would they have generally more Republican leanings, or conservative leanings? Or did it just really depend on the individual?

INTERVIEWEE: I think it depends on the individual. Generally, what I saw throughout all the time, they generally were trying to reach out to the community and they were always trying to get us technical folks to simplify our language.

INTERVIEWER: Okay.

INTERVIEWEE: Which I understand, to be quite honest.

INTERVIEWER: Yeah.

INTERVIEWEE: And I could usually, I was relatively successful with working with communities, but part of the reason I did that I always joked it was how I'd explain it just like I would to my mother, who is a very knowledgeable person but only had a sixth-grade education. So you have to translate the words. And that's what you have to do when you're working with the community.

INTERVIEWER: That makes sense. And you said this started – do you know approximately what year?

INTERVIEWEE: I would say within the first one or two years of the Obama guys, you started seeing more of that let's watch what we're saying, and things like that. I mean, when the Bush II did it, they were in there, too. But they didn't enforce it all the time. They weren't as conscientious about it. I think the Obama administration during their terms was much more conscientious about it.

INTERVIEWER: That's really very – and you think that's because Bush maybe his projects had a different focus?

INTERVIEWEE: Yeah. I mean, and they weren't as controversial. Because when Bush was doing it, we were doing Superfund, and he kind of did this and that. But I think Bush and Bush II in general was focusing on other things. So when it came to the environmental stuff, he really didn't fuss with it very much. But the Obama guys did because that was part of what they were trying to do, and that was part of their kind of overall focus.

INTERVIEWER: Yeah. That was actually – and so the next question, actually, is sort of how well the work of the agency was supported by the White House, and how that trickles down.

INTERVIEWEE: Unfortunately, what I tended to see was because of the politics – and this, once again, is a perception—if let's say the people that were working on what the number for a particular chemical was that would create a risk, the agency would take much longer to look at the data as you kind of move through the Obama administration years. And I think it's basically because they wanted to kind of not stir things up unless they absolutely, positively had to. And so I know that some of the risk people would mumble about the fact that the agency had not released a new clean-up number for a particular chemical. And it was basically being held back by reviews at the administration levels.

INTERVIEWER: And this was under Obama?

INTERVIEWEE: Yes.

INTERVIEWER: Trying to, you said, be more careful about –

INTERVIEWEE: Now, it was certainly the same at Bush, but I was just more aware of it under the Obama guys.

INTERVIEWER: Oh. So you think that people potentially were scrutinizing his moves more because, like you said, he was sort of more controversial?

INTERVIEWEE: I think that's what it was. Yeah.

<T: 40 min>

You know, if you sneeze at all, the Republicans would hang him out to dry.

INTERVIEWER: So and you had mentioned Bush versus Obama. Do you think congress – I know congress changed a few times throughout the whole time, as well as the senate.

INTERVIEWEE: Right.

INTERVIEWER: But did you feel any of those transitions in your work, as well?

INTERVIEWEE: I think it was primarily the overall context that you would see changed. I mean, like I worked with staffers and interacted with folks in Nevada because that mine was very high profile. And so I gave several tours to like staffers of Senator Reid. And so he would have issues about cleaning up that mine, but he was always touchy about disturbing the mining industry in Nevada because it was a big political faction. So you always kind of got this impression that – and I know the agency and the region nine folks were actually willing to push to list that site. Because they had tried three times and they'd been rejected by the state two times and this was the second time. And they actually finally got them to agree to it a year ago, and now I have a feeling with the changing of administration that will screw it up again. But they tried to get Senator Reid to apply political pressure behind the scenes to the governor, who was a Republican, to help push the listing. And Reid wanted the site cleaned up, but he was not willing to apply pressure to the governor.

INTERVIEWER: Oh, wow.

INTERVIEWEE: Because of backlash within Nevada politics, I assume.

INTERVIEWER: He was trying to work on his own, make sure he doesn't upset any of his constituents?

INTERVIEWEE: Exactly. His constituents. Because he was successful at keeping people in the urban areas of Las Vegas happy, but he also had a pretty good contingent of the mining folks in the state that like him, as well, because his father was a miner. He even did some mining.

So he kind of came from the industry. So he was very successful at kind of balancing across that divide. And so when he did finally, this last time, he finally agreed to list it because there's no other way to get the money to clean up one of the worst problems. Then, of course, Reid was quite happy about it. But it was really driven by the lack of funds that the state could not come up with unless EPA listed the site. Because EPA cannot spend money to clean up a site unless it's actually listed on the national priority list.

INTERVIEWER: So it's actually getting it onto that list is one of the biggest –

INTERVIEWEE: It's gotta be on that list. They could investigate. You can do kind of what they call removals, which is small little actions. But you really can't spend the big money if it's not listed, because you would go to the national panel and headquarters and go, "I want $30 million to clean this." And they go, "Well,

it's listed, isn't it?" And you go, "Oh, no." And they go, "Well, then it doesn't sound like it's bad enough I should put money into it."

INTERVIEWER: Wow.

INTERVIEWEE: So it's kind of a catch-22. So the states – and Nevada was masters at this – they would use that to halt the repairs.

INTERVIEWER: So getting onto the list, you said, was one of the bigger hurdles?

INTERVIEWEE: Yes.

INTERVIEWER: Is it difficult, then, now that this – actually, can I jump back real quick and ask what site was this?

INTERVIEWEE: Mm-hmm. This was the Yerington mine site in Nevada.

INTERVIEWER: Yerington?

INTERVIEWEE: Yeah. It's Anaconda Copper Mine. It's listed, I think, as Anaconda Copper. It's in the town of Yerington, Nevada.

INTERVIEWER: Okay. Cool. Just to have some reference in case, yeah.

INTERVIEWEE: Oh, yeah.

INTERVIEWER: But so this is on the list now? Is it difficult to get it taken off the list?

INTERVIEWEE: Well, the interesting thing – and this is, you know, this may not relate to your questions, but – because I'm still working as a part-time consultant for a no fault firm, and so I've been helping them with some of this stuff. And they have been contracted by the EPA to help with some of the legal documents involved in kind of finalizing a clean-up approach. And in this particular case, the state of Nevada was only willing to let EPA list it if EPA could come up with the $30 million to do this clean-up. That was kind of a quid pro quo.

INTERVIEWER: Oh.

INTERVIEWEE: In other words, "We'll back off. We'll let you do it, but you've got to fund it." And so EPA and the regional administrator talked to the governor of Nevada and said, "That's what we'll do, and then we'll list it." Well, that only covered part of the site. The rest of the site was to be cleaned up and it would be the legal responsibility of British Petroleum. Because British Petroleum bought ARCO. ARCO, in turn, had bought Anaconda. They were the people who trashed the neighborhood was Anaconda.

INTERVIEWER: Okay.

INTERVIEWEE: So that meant the liability flowed all the way up to British Petroleum. Well, British Petroleum is very, very good at stalling and never cleaning up things. Usually when you had a meeting with British Petroleum there were at least three or four lawyers in the room. But I'm sure their hourly rates started at $500.00 and went up.

INTERVIEWER: Wow.

INTERVIEWEE: And so everything seemed to be moving forward this year. Well, now with the change in administration, one of the questions is will the Trump administration put up the money – in this case, $30 million – to start this clean-up? It would take two years to do the clean-up and $30 million. Well, there's certainly a lot of uncertainty in whether or not that money will be available.

And so as I understand it in the background my buddies from British Petroleum have been talking to the state of Nevada saying, "Gee whiz. If you don't have the money to clean it up that EPA was going to give you, maybe we'll give you some money and then we'll defer the listing so it won't be on the national priority list. "You can put it on a quote state list and then we'll work out when we need to clean it up."

INTERVIEWER: Huh.

INTERVIEWEE: In other words, they're going to buy their way out of it.

INTERVIEWER: Like honestly deferring it?

INTERVIEWEE: Well, because the state of Nevada has never been pushing for these kind of things. And I could see BP having fought with these guys for three and a half years going, "Well, now we know that, we'll take care of this part now. And then we'll wait a couple of years and we'll do this part." And the deal with British Petroleum that always kind of impacted working on this site was British Petroleum bought ARCO. ARCO bought Anaconda. When ARCO bought Anaconda, they wound up inheriting $500 million worth of clean-up in Butte, Montana. Big, huge messy Superfund site.

INTERVIEWER: And not what they expected?

INTERVIEWEE: Yeah. Yeah. Well, they knew when they bought ARCO they had these environmental liabilities, but they thought they could get out of them. But they didn't. ARCO had to spend the money, which then means it came out of the pocket of British Petroleum. And British Petroleum, in my mind, thought they were seeing the same kind of scenario potentially playing out on this site in Yerington, Nevada. We're probably looking at $200 or $300 million, rather than $500. But it's still expensive.

INTERVIEWER: Yeah.

INTERVIEWEE: So it's to their benefit to draw it out as long as possible. And I think that may play out with the change of administration. Obviously, they're trying to. How it might work out, time will tell.

INTERVIEWER: Yeah. And part of that changing how it will work out is because of what you talked about with the relationship with British Petroleum?

INTERVIEWEE: Yes. Mm-hmm.

INTERVIEWER: And I guess just bringing that up to other businesses in general, how do you think the relationship with business was during the Bush administration, and then with the Obama administration?

INTERVIEWEE: I'd say it's about the same. Well, yeah, it was about the same. Because when I first started working at EPA, I worked on some sites in Arizona. And we spent a lot of time arguing with a large manufacturing company that owned a very large solvent site in the western part of Phoenix basin. And they were always very contentious, too. I mean, they would argue with you to the end of the day about what needed to be done and what they were responsible for and what not.

INTERVIEWER: Okay.

INTERVIEWEE: And I don't think it was any different working with the companies under the Obama thing.

INTERVIEWER: So it's always been sort of that business—

INTERVIEWEE: Yeah. I mean because, you know, and having worked for these large companies in the past – just like I would tell the community members – I said, "Do you think any company would want you to come into the boardroom working for them and say, 'You know, to do the right thing you ought to spend $3 million'?"

INTERVIEWER: No. Yeah. That's a lot of money.

INTERVIEWEE: I said, "They'd kick you out of the room."

INTERVIEWER: Right.

INTERVIEWEE: I said, "Now if you could go in and say, 'You're going to have to spend $3 million because if not they're going to fine you or they're going to put you in jail,' then they would say, 'Oh, well. What do we got to do?' " And that's how that works.

INTERVIEWER: Huh.

INTERVIEWEE: So that's why even though regulations can be a painful process, I don't think you're going to get it done without them, because the profit motive in capitalism doesn't allow it.

INTERVIEWER: Yeah. That definitely sounds like something that's been persisting for a while. So, if not ever. But unless there's anything more to speak to on this site in Nevada, you were saying the Anaconda Copper Mine –

INTERVIEWEE: Right.

INTERVIEWER: Any last thoughts on that subject before I move onto some of the final questions?

INTERVIEWEE: No. Like I say, we'll see how it goes. Right now the state is working with EPA. They're trying to list it. I think the issues that may impact that would be how the Trump administration would address both Superfund, and would they appropriate money to Superfund, and how that in turn might show up in that particular project.

<T: 50 min>

INTERVIEWER: Yeah. I just thought of one other follow-up question. What do you think it would mean for the feeling at Superfund and in your office in general if a project like this were to get, were to not go forward?

INTERVIEWEE: I think it would frustrate the people working on it. I mean, I certainly, I worked on that particular site for about three and a half years, and then I transferred to other sites because EPA allows you to transfer after three years. And part of the reason I did that beyond just the fact I had to do a lot of travel was it was just, you're kind of beating your head against the wall. And so it's the difficulty, it feels good when I'm not doing it. So you move to other projects. And that's what I did. I subsequently picked up projects in California. Because my kind of specialty was working on mining sites.

INTERVIEWER: And so also just now that we've talked about this one specific project, what were the other big Superfund projects that you worked on?

INTERVIEWEE: I worked on Iron Mountain Mine in California, which is a very large clean-up that's been funded and everything. It's ongoing. And there I was kind of

managing EPA's input on oversight issues. So we were working with companies that were taking care of the acid mine drainage and everything like that. And it's a fairly large plant. Their operations budget is roughly $5 to $6 million a year. And they have a little company that handles all the management. It has about 15 or 20 employees. But it's a particularly nasty copper mine. It's up in northern California and when it wasn't being cleaned all the copper that went down into the river was killing all of the salmon and the trout.

INTERVIEWER: Ooh.

INTERVIEWEE: So it was a very significant clean-up that even the community up there – it was really very conservative – was kind of begrudgingly, "Well, we're glad they're doing it."

INTERVIEWER: Yeah.

INTERVIEWEE: So I worked on that one. And then another one that I worked on was a mercury mine, and this is the one I joked about being in the new wine country. And that's down in Paso Robles, which is down in central California. And it was a small mercury mine owned by a family. And had been run for years. They had releases of mercury in the soil and the water. And then that went seven miles downstream into a very large man-made irrigation reservoir. And it basically wound up putting methyl-mercury into the fish in that reservoir, so there are fish advisories. You're not supposed to eat the fish out of that reservoir.

INTERVIEWER: Okay. And what were the dates on that one?

INTERVIEWEE: That one I started in 2007. And let's see. And Iron Mountain I started in 2010. And both of those I worked all the way through when I retired.

INTERVIEWER: Okay. Oh, so ongoing. You would pick it up and then focus on it, so it's ongoing?

INTERVIEWEE: Yeah. And then I also worked on an air force base from 2007 to '10.

INTERVIEWER: Wow.

INTERVIEWEE: So I got to fight with my friends in the air force.

INTERVIEWER: Wow. That's really like a cool experience.

INTERVIEWEE: You kind of bounce around. This was a site over in Sacramento. It's called McClellan Air Force Base.

INTERVIEWER: Oh, okay—

INTERVIEWEE: And the air force had closed it down. Yeah. And I was working primarily on the radiological contamination because of my prior experience in uranium. So I was doing a lot of that kind of investigation and working on that stuff.

INTERVIEWER: Wow. Do we have your resume? I thought I may ask, that way I can look up some of these dates and—

INTERVIEWEE: No. I can find an electronic copy and ship it off to you. That's easily done.

INTERVIEWER: If it's not too much trouble.

INTERVIEWEE: No. It's not trouble. It's a real fancy razzle-dazzle one that my current employer made to make people think I walk on water.

INTERVIEWER: Yeah. That's great. That's—

INTERVIEWEE: That's what they do in […]. When you get hired, when you're retired, you work for somebody for a few hours doing technical review, and then they want to sell your resume. They make it look really pretty and it's kind of like, "Geez. I can't believe I did that […]."

INTERVIEWER: You're like, "That would be great to have when I'm 20. Really go."

INTERVIEWEE: But, yeah. I can send that to you. No problem.

INTERVIEWER: Yeah. I'm in my 20s now, but I tried to – well, didn't try, successfully – narrowed my resume to one page. And I never know how I'll do it when I'm –

INTERVIEWEE: Well, what you have to do – you know, over the years I've kept track of all of mine and different jobs and stuff. I have ten different versions.

INTERVIEWER: Yeah.

INTERVIEWEE: And they all modify. And then what you do as you get older you can't put everything in there.

INTERVIEWER: Exactly.

INTERVIEWEE: So then what you try to do is summarize and emphasize what you think your new employer you're going to send this to really wants. And then if they want all the other verbiage, fine. You can give it to them.

INTERVIEWER: That makes sense.

INTERVIEWEE: But, yeah, you get into that a lot. It's kind of resume is kind of a pain.

INTERVIEWER: Have your resume to get the interview and then go forward.

INTERVIEWEE: Pretty much.

INTERVIEWER: Wow. Back to the questions. When you were talking about the Iron Mountain Mine and how the community wanted it to clean up, even though you said they were potentially more conservative—

INTERVIEWEE: Oh, yeah.

INTERVIEWER: What makes a public actually more receptive to Superfund or EPA intervention?

INTERVIEWEE: Well, I think the first thing is it has to be something – whatever you're cleaning up has to be something that the community thinks is important. So in other words, if you're cleaning up a mining site and it's way up in the middle of nowhere and it impacts a bird, that's not a big deal. Or maybe two or three people down the stream. But in the case of Iron Mountain, the city of Redding, which is the nearest big city to that site, it's almost its total economy is based on tourism, hunting, and fishing.

And so the fact that EPA cleaned up the site and saved fishing was a very big deal. So in that case they were much more receptive to the clean-up efforts and in general, I think EPA's been considered more favorable than even some of the old mining owners that we fought with up there, because they knew he was not worried about taking care of like the fish and the critters in the area.

INTERVIEWER: Do you think the connection and degrees of separation between the site and the people?

INTERVIEWEE: That's true. That's very true, actually. If you have a site that's right next door like the Yerington mine site in Nevada. The town of Yerington is a mile away from the mine. So if you have contaminated groundwater it's impacting the

area. So that's where you would get community involved, where they were very concerned. The same thing on that site when you had, they had a lot of tailings piles.

If you had a big wind storm, it would blow dust into the community. And the people would say, "What's in that dust that my kid's inhaling?" So that would then, in turn, activate a lot of the local folks who have had big concerns about that health issue. But the more remote it is, the less the community probably will be receptive to it.

And then the other thing I know based on studies – and I think my experience kind of supported that – is the more contentious it is the more argument there is between government agencies and the company to clean it up and stuff, it causes a lot more kind of concern within the community – business communities, local politicians. So if you have a site that everybody agrees and it's moving forward pretty quickly, it's nowhere near as contentious.

When I was working in consulting, I worked on an addition to the Port of Oakland. And it was a naval base. And they were closing it down, cleaning it up. That thing went through all the process in like two years. It was amazing how fast that site went. And that basically was because the port already was set up. They were going to put in a bunch of claims. They're going to stack containers. Nobody was going to put a day care center on it. And it created jobs.

INTERVIEWER: Okay.

INTERVIEWEE: So they were all happy campers. But some of these other cases, if it's not quite that much of a slam dunk, it becomes much more contentious.

INTERVIEWER: Okay. That makes sense. So transitioning just to a slightly different question to be more personal, what do you think were some of the best achievements of your work while you were at the agency and why?

INTERVIEWEE: Well, I think I was able to work on several sites, bring a lot of good science to it. And in general, I've been pretty successful at working with the communities. So I would get most of the people that you were talking to in public meetings and stuff to acknowledge that you were probably doing a good thing. I kind of joke they may think I was working for the dark side. But I wasn't evil. I was just misguided.

And so I think in that part generally what I've found is when you talk to an individual and you check into the motel someplace, and you say, "Well, I'm working on this site." And you kind of checking to see if they're going to be mad at you or not. And they go, "No. Somebody should clean that up." So that the average citizen, I don't think was that uptight. But you get some guy who is a retired doctor, and he's got some vineyard down the road, and he thinks you're part of this too many regulations and stuff, and it's costing him money and time. Well, then he's unhappy.

<T: 60 min>

And then you would just have to say, "Well, you know, the science says if, let's say, a particular chemical contaminant is there, what it's going to do is

it's not going to cause somebody to fall over dead. But if it's like lead, let's say, it's not going to cause you to die, but it means your kid's going to be dumb." So you have to kind of translate it for them. And so in general I think I was successful that way. And I think all of the sites that I worked on I think the technical solutions were sound and they were well regarded.

And EPA would allow you to present papers regarding those sites without too much of a control to other professional agencies and then internal meetings. They're very good with internal meetings. So you could go to a meeting with a lot of other project managers share solutions on how you cleaned up a particular issue on a site, whether it was cleaning up solvents underneath an old electronics manufacturer, or whether it was how to clean up this acid mine drainage from a mine.

INTERVIEWER: So do you actually share your insights among—

INTERVIEWEE: Yeah.

INTERVIEWER: —people that have relevant projects?

INTERVIEWEE: Exactly. And EPA was really good, particularly some of the resource folks, in sponsoring meetings, conferences, that actually brought together EPA folks. It brought together other state agencies doing environmental work and also the industry.

And so they were primarily presenting technical problems in how people are trying to solve them or lessons learned. Like don't do this first because you're wasting your money. Do this next. And I've been to at least two or three of those. And they were very good. And they were well-received. You'd be working with people in the industry, as well as other state regulators.

INTERVIEWER: Yeah. And this happened throughout your entire tenure there?

INTERVIEWEE: Uh-huh. Yeah.

INTERVIEWER: Wow—

INTERVIEWEE: They were very good about letting you go. Yeah, the EPA. Yeah. If you're in the private sector, you've got to convince them it's going to make them money somehow.

INTERVIEWER: Okay.

INTERVIEWEE: EPA was not that bad. EPA was really pretty good about that.

INTERVIEWER: So convincing, I guess, the private sector how actually learning insights from other projects would help with their project.

INTERVIEWEE: Yeah. They all do. They all share notes. Because if they can come up with a smarter, cheaper way to clean it up, they're ahead of the game.

INTERVIEWER: Right.

INTERVIEWEE: And having worked in the industry myself, I was never adamant that you're inherently evil and you need to spend every dime you've got. It's kind of like what do we need to do to clean it up? And if it's the cheapest, best way and it saves you guys a little money, but it still cleans it up, great. We're all winners.

INTERVIEWER: Do you think that these types of sort of conferences will still be going on in the future administration? Or is that something that you think is over?

INTERVIEWEE: Well, based on what we're seeing with the indications with the current administration, my initial guess—and this is just an assumption or guess— if the noises we're hearing about climate change and everything disappearing from web pages will probably also come down the road on other scientific endeavors. But that may be just me being cynical.

INTERVIEWER: You really feel like—

INTERVIEWEE: But I just kind of, the people that you're kind of seeing proposed and some of the proposed things going through congress it's kind of like it really seems to be a time in which science is being dismissed for political reasons. I mean, we all argue about what's the right scientific answer. But it shouldn't be based on what your party is.

INTERVIEWER: Yeah. I think at least for me that's one of the big reasons why I am so interested, just to – science is something I value and I feel like it seems like you value it, and I hope that that's going to continue to be valued in the future.

INTERVIEWEE: Well, and it's – I always enjoy it. I still am a member of several professional groups in geology. And you talk to the neighborhood kids about rocks and volcanoes and stuff and geology, they love it. So and when you look at what's done there's an incredible amount of stuff and research that's been done that's kind of mind-boggling. So I find it interesting and I certainly think it has value for society. And I really do not think it should be politicized. But that's what you seem to be seeing on the horizon.

INTERVIEWER: Yeah. I'm sure it's also not. I guess maybe we're getting into this question a little bit.

INTERVIEWER: And you addressed this, as well. But on the negative side, what do you feel were your most frustrating experiences?

INTERVIEWEE: I think the most frustrating experiences was if you had a site that you wanted to move forward and the politics wouldn't allow it. That would be frustrating. But I think more than that is the agency over the past so many years – and I don't know if it's just specifically during the Obama administration – seemed to get much more paperwork intensive. You spent a lot more time on that. And they have definitely got into a great deal more of being able to do the federal contracting, blah, blah, blah. And you'd spend a huge amount of time on that. And it's just you didn't get to do the test […], which is what you really wanted to do because you were spending time in the office doing paperwork.

INTERVIEWER: Mm-hmm. Actually, paperwork is interesting you brought that up. Do you feel like there was a lot of paperwork that you were required to do?

INTERVIEWEE: Oh, yes.

INTERVIEWER: Do you feel like most of that was useful or just more frustrating and not?

INTERVIEWEE: Well, some of it is. You can certainly understand. I mean, I know you have to keep good records and communicate with other people.

It's key to being a good project manager. But sometimes you spend a lot of time, let's say with paperwork that I think was more driven for some bureaucrat's idea in Washington of what they thought was appropriate to keep somebody happy higher up. That's—

INTERVIEWER: Okay.

INTERVIEWEE: And I think the other frustration I think I've mentioned is what I have noticed when I was working with EPA is their computer systems and how they kind of support them and use them are less than impressive.

INTERVIEWER: Oh? Really?

INTERVIEWEE: Well, but I've come to the conclusion that when government agencies buy computers they're not smart enough to really buy them. And so what they do is they talk to a contractor and say, "Can we get something that does this?" And the contractor says, "Sure." And then maybe they could do it, maybe they can't. And then I'm sure on the contractors' side, the agency comes back and goes, "Oh, but I want the following whistles and bells."

And then the contractor goes, "Well, this wasn't designed for those whistles and bells." And they go, "Oh, we need this so we can make a management report 14 layers higher. I need the whistles and bells." And so what you end up with at the end is the proverbial camel that's a horse designed by committee.

And then it all gets pushed down to the working level, right? And they go, "Here's your camel." And you're going, "I needed a horse. What am I going to do with this hump?" And they kind of go, "I don't know. It's your camel." And it is frustrating. The computer and that kind of stuff I think probably frustrates a lot of people at the agencies. But that's not just EPA, I know. That's federal government, in general.

INTERVIEWER: Computers. I feel like, and the reason you don't buy the horse to begin with is because it's a higher budget, you think?

INTERVIEWEE: No. And it's like, you know, and I'm sure, like I say, having worked in the private sector, if you're not really clear on what you want and if you don't really know the ins and outs of what you want, then it's much more difficult to get the product.

And I do think that's my own kind of bias in there. But I do think they certainly could improve their computer support and systems, and then it would probably make it much less frustrating.

INTERVIEWER: Yeah. Actually, reading into this fun—more fun—question, I think, what changes in the agency do you feel might improve what it does or is supposed to do to make it even healthier and more fully functioning?

INTERVIEWEE: I think if certainly improve computers.

INTERVIEWER: I was going to say it feels like it leads right into it.

INTERVIEWEE: I think the other thing that they do – and this reflects my background – even though you kind of work as a team within EPA Superfund, they really didn't have a culture that promoted teams. In other words, you would reach out to this person and say, "I need some help on this." And you kind of drag them into it.

They never really establish teams and follow through with it. And I found that when I was working in consulting teams that were effective and put together and worked well and had a lot of good communication with everybody, that's key, was incredibly effective. There's work that I did in the consulting business I never would have been able to do without a good team.

The agencies, because they tend to be hierarchical, and certainly they have union issues and other stuff, but it didn't seem to have quite that team

approach. So I do think that would work better. And then if they had – one of the problems you see with EPA is, EPA is kind of composed of what people would kind of use to cliché term of silos. Because it basically was put together to enforce the clean water act, Superfund, clean air, and RCRA, which is haz waste handling.

<T: 70 min>

And those groups very seldom talk to each other within the EPA.

INTERVIEWER: Okay.

INTERVIEWEE: And there would be some times you'd be working on a site and you really needed to know what the RCRA issues were. And it would be a real headache to find it out. I would suspect if they could really do it – and I know they've talked about a one EPA program and stuff in the past – but if they really put the management commitment and resources behind more, let's say, developing the communication and interaction, I think it would be much more effective and it would help the morale more.

INTERVIEWER: To have more people involved in different projects?

INTERVIEWEE: Yeah. Because then you know, even if it's just a general session, you know what kind of battles the air guys are having. You know what kind of battles the water guys are having. And then you can share techniques, too. Because there are technical things that you can use between them. But on average it was pretty much each guy worked on their own thing. So it was kind of isolated that way, and I don't think it was very successful.

INTERVIEWER: Right. Right. That makes a lot of sense. Especially, yeah, with you said having the silo structure. We're reading about that now and learning about it. There's a lot of different departments that I feel like each have their own mission, but actually bringing all of those relevant things together would potentially be useful.

INTERVIEWEE: Right.

INTERVIEWER: You mentioned briefly, too, as well union issues. Do you feel like that, what kind of union experiences you had, did you have with the union?

INTERVIEWEE: Well, I was a union rep with the scientists, and they kind of would make noises when the management was going to do this for remodeling and stuff like that. But there wasn't a lot. But I do think there was always you would see issues where maybe you had somebody in a clerical part that were, of course, a union. And then the civil service, some of those people were great. Some of them had pretty much been retired in place for 20 years. [Laughter]

INTERVIEWER: […]

INTERVIEWEE: So and I'm not saying you don't have that in the private sector, because I ran into it there, too. But it's sometimes – and I don't know if it's a union or if it's the civil service regs, but it can make it difficult for a supervisor to take some actions. And so what you tended to get was at the end of the day they'd just transfer that person laterally to somebody else. And so you wind up with a problem child that somebody else didn't want.

INTERVIEWER: Okay. Huh.

INTERVIEWEE: So that happened.

INTERVIEWER: Yeah. I feel like talking with just about unions in general that happens more often.

INTERVIEWEE: Yeah. I generally think unions do a good job, but they have negatives, too. There's no doubt about that.

INTERVIEWER: Thanks for that. So I have just – we're almost at the end here. I know, I don't want to keep you on too, too long since we're getting close to an hour and a half and you've had a long day.

INTERVIEWEE: Yeah. Mm-hmm.

INTERVIEWER: But so just before wrapping up the section on transitions here, is there anything else you want to add about your thoughts overall about the transition from Bush to Obama and how your job fit into that? Just any things that we didn't address?

INTERVIEWEE: No. Like I said, we didn't really see – in that transition all you really saw was you kept doing your job the same. The management might have a different focus and they wouldn't necessarily, maybe the previous guys could give you time quicker than the new guys, or whatever. Because the management that comes out of a new administration tries to focus on whatever the new administration's emphasis is.

But I do think, at least in region nine, that there was an equal or even a larger effect on how the EPA would work with the other states. So the issue of how they function with the other states to implement the laws and stuff seemed to have as much or more of an effect than even the national level did.

INTERVIEWER: Okay. So you definitely did see the state influence there, at least?

INTERVIEWEE: Yeah. Because, and like I say, I'm assuming they all have those issues. But with California, California was very conservative. Sometimes they'd be more conservative than we would at EPA. And then you have the state of Nevada that didn't want anybody doing it. And then when I worked in Arizona when I first started they were more conservative, or as conservative as we were.

Then they changed administrations and then they didn't want to do anything. So you always had to interact with that state and how they were interacting with the federal level. And unfortunately with environmental contamination one of the biggest problems is that contamination does not stop at state borders.

INTERVIEWER: Yeah. Yeah.

INTERVIEWEE: And so if Nevada is trashing the air, which they were doing, or letting the mining companies do it one time, then the bad air was blowing into Idaho and it was showing up in their fish. But they were going to sue Nevada for not implementing the regulations they had in their records. And so and then we'd get in there, right, and then it's kind of like, well, what are the federal levels? And so it's all that kind of interaction stuff.

INTERVIEWER: Right. Lots of interactions.

INTERVIEWEE: You have a lot, a lot. I got really tired of conference calls.

INTERVIEWER: Oh, wow. Yeah. Between the two different parties trying to mitigate that?

INTERVIEWEE: Yeah.

INTERVIEWER: I think some of the—

INTERVIEWEE: Well, like I say, I don't think it will change any as far as that part goes.

INTERVIEWER: Yeah.

INTERVIEWEE: But the overall push will. Now with the proposed appointment for Pruitt for the head of the EPA, since he really dislikes the EPA and I would suspect the main goal would be to dismantle EPA, who knows what will come out of that.

INTERVIEWER: Yeah. I was going to say it might be a slightly trickier question, but what parts of the EPA in the agency as a whole do you feel are most vulnerable?

INTERVIEWEE: I would suspect if you just – and it's just coming from following the press – it would be things like the clean air plan, which is kind of the climate change stuff for the power plants is certainly in peril. Clean water, they go after because they were trying to expand the definition of a wetland and nobody liked that. Those are probably the main ones that will get hit. Haz waste and sites I don't think is a problem, and I suspect Superfund's not on the radar.

But it won't get any money. What they'll probably do is they'll give you enough money to say, "Oh, yeah. We're doing something." But it won't be an enthusiastic kind of thing. And then in a Superfund you have a site and you're saying, "I'm going after, let's say Koch Oil," it ain't going anywhere.

INTERVIEWER: Mm-hmm. That would be a—

INTERVIEWEE: If Pruitt, who loves the oil companies and Koch, they won't do – what they'll do is they'll cut back the enforcement. There won't be any lawyers to do anything.

INTERVIEWER: Right.

INTERVIEWEE: And I wouldn't be surprised if they cut back funding for the contractors which help you do the investigation that ultimately lead to the enforcement.

INTERVIEWER: Do you think the EPA's relationship with other agencies will change?

INTERVIEWEE: Pardon?

INTERVIEWER: The EPA's relationship and interaction with other agencies? I mean, given that the EPA is—

INTERVIEWEE: It can. But you've gone into a lot of – the agencies weren't always hostile but you got into turf battles.

INTERVIEWER: Oh, okay.

INTERVIEWEE: Like I would work on a site that BLM would have and EPA would be in there. And the state of California would be in there. And it was always who was responsible for what? And each one would go, "I don't want you to spend my money." That kind of thing. So it's very much, there's still, it's similar to like when I was talking about an EPA silos, the agencies are very much in silos.

INTERVIEWER: Right. Right. And this is, I guess, for your job and just in general, as well. Any data collection or public information that you think is important to keep that's, I guess, liable to end? Some of it's already being saved, but just if there were any sources that you wanted to from your job tell us about that you think were relevant, we could look into that, as well.

INTERVIEWEE: Well, I think as long as if somebody's working on a Superfund site and there's data sets that have been stored for that work, that certainly should be

saved. If nothing else, to come back later and make sure that you've cleaned up everything you need to.

INTERVIEWER: Right.

INTERVIEWEE: As a frustrated scientist, I think they should save it all. I know it's going to cost money sometimes. And it doesn't mean it has to be, spend all the money to make it available to everybody online. But at least make it, get it archived somewhere so you can still get to it.

INTERVIEWER: So at least to archive it for picking it up in the future?

INTERVIEWEE: Yeah. Exactly. I mean, you spent a lot of money, and if it's good, reliable data, people when I was in the exploration business looking for minerals or petroleum, the first thing you would do when you moved into a new area, the company would say, "Well, we're going to start looking in Montana now." Well, the first thing you would do is you would go back and look and see what people did before. Because what you're hoping to do is pick up something they missed. Well, the only way you can do that is to look at old data.

INTERVIEWER: Right.

INTERVIEWEE: And if it's certainly with the environmental business, if it's something that they realized, "Gee whiz, we thought 100 parts per billion were okay before, but now new research says that 10 should really be the number,"—which happens a lot—then you got to be able to go back and get to that data.

You can't assume that your science is final and firm. You have to allow for future change and further investigation works. So you don't want to say, "Okay. I've got it done. Cleaned up. Throw it away." Don't do that.

INTERVIEWER: Yeah. So you think the new administration will keep the data? Or is that something that's at risk for them getting rid of it?

<T: 80 min>

INTERVIEWEE: My assumption based on what I'm reading is it's at risk.

INTERVIEWER: Yeah? Okay.

INTERVIEWEE: Because if you still have it there, somebody can pick it up and stir things up. And I kind of joke about if it walks like a duck and it quacks like a duck, I think we're looking at a duck. But anyway, I don't know. You can't really tell. And it's like when they were talking about nobody talking to the press. And so for media and stuff, the Obama administration did the same thing, so I can't totally pick on the Trump guys for that. I don't know if they were as pervasive or as strict, but the Obama guys did that, too.

INTERVIEWER: Can you explain more what did they do?

INTERVIEWEE: Well, they'll tell you, you know, "We don't want you talking to the press without going through our community outreach," blah, blah, blah. And a lot of that's the first kind of initial transition thing. So it's not necessarily that they want to suppress all communications. But even though I hate to say anything good about the Trump guys—

INTERVIEWER: And that's—

INTERVIEWEE: —they're not the only ones that do that.

INTERVIEWER: In what ways, I guess, in this administration do you feel like could be radically different? I mean, you've talked a little bit about the whole climate change thing, but just—

INTERVIEWEE: Well, I think it's because of when you see them pulling the pages off that even mention the word, like when they were pulling off the pages on climate change, and stuff like that, I think there's definitely a conscientious effort to kind of make that information and whole topic go away.

INTERVIEWER: Okay.

INTERVIEWEE: And that's perception. But it's mine.

INTERVIEWER: Yeah. It's a perception of that. I think that's what a lot of people are seeing. That's definitely something that we will be watching for.

INTERVIEWEE: Yeah. And since I'm not working at the agency any more—I've been retired for about a year and a half—the actual realities of it, I don't know.

[…]

[End of Interview]