

Oil and gas collaboration a success

Padre Island National Seashore, Texas, completed a successful collaboration with the Railroad Commission of Texas in November 1996, culminating three years of effort to bring a leaking gas well under compliance with NPS nonfederal oil and gas rights regulations. The well operator's lack of diligence prompted growing concern about navigational safety and potential environmental degradation at the park. As a result, the park filed a complaint to the state about the well, which is located in the Laguna Madre, a shallow, hyper-saline water area of the park noted for its extensive seagrass beds, productive fishery, and migratory bird rookeries.

The Railroad Commission, the state agency that administers the statewide oil and gas production and permitting program, prompted the operator to comply with state oil and gas rules and pollution prevention laws. But when the operator failed to respond, the commission held an administrative hearing in June 1995 to determine appropriate penalties. Linda Dansby, the Intermountain Region Minerals/Oil and Gas Program Leader, assisted Paul Eubank, Environmental Protection Specialist at the park, to prepare the NPS statement for the hearing. Held before a legal and technical examiner, the hearing resolved the issue, and the Railroad Commission ordered the well plugged and fined the operator \$3,000. Subsequently, the commission plugged the well and bore the cost of \$120,000.

The remote location of the well, shallow waters of the lagoon, and seagrass beds contributed to the complexity of plugging this well. Mr. Tim McGilvary of the San Antonio office of the Railroad Commission coordinated the project. His professional expertise and close communication with the park resulted in identifying access and resource issues, and developing innovative methods, such as using air boats to bring the plugging rig to the well. The well was plugged in November 1996 without impacting ecologically important seagrass beds.

In May 1997, the Railroad Commission continued its work with the National Park Service by using the same oil and gas rules and fund for plugging wells to seal an abandoned oil well at Big Thicket National Preserve. The inactive oil well was the subject of a complaint filed by the park in 1995, and the commission notified the operator to plug the well. The park monitored the site and documented that the operator had failed to take action. Later, the Railroad Commission plugged the well, at a cost of \$8,000, and also removed salvageable oil field equipment. The park's skill in applying NPS regulations along with state oil and gas rules, maximized their ability to develop a partnership with the Railroad Commission of Texas toward a common goal of protecting park resources.