

Hundreds of Hermosans and friends join hands in oil protest

Alana Garrigues, The Beach Reporter, 5-22-14

On a hot, sunny afternoon last Saturday, hundreds of friends, families and strangers reached out across the Hermosa Beach sand, holding hands and standing together against the proposed oil-drilling project by E&B National Resources.

Prior to noon, they'd been dispersed across the beach, filling sand buckets with bits of trash and posing with letters stuck in the sand spelling out "Keep the Ban." Some held a white board scribbled with "I oppose oil because (fill in the blank)," and "I am from (fill in the blank)" as curious tourists looked on, occasionally stopping to join in or take a selfie with the sea of volunteers in the background.

While the total number of hand-holders was unknown, more than 600 people showed up just south of the Hermosa Beach Pier throughout the morning to sign waivers and volunteer for a beach clean-up. Once the trash was gathered, hundreds of folks stuck around for Hands Across the Sand. The line of people, young and old, Hermosans and out-of-towners extended from the first lifeguard tower north of the pier beyond the second tower south of the Pier.

It was a turnout that shocked event organizers, who were expecting about 400, based on event RSVPs. However, they gladly welcomed everyone who wanted to chip in, and received emails and phone calls from more people who wanted to stop by, but got stuck in the endless circle of searching for nearby parking spaces.

Stacey Armato of Keep Hermosa hermosa and Stop Hermosa Beach Oil said last year the annual international event drew about 30 volunteers to Hermosa Beach, but this year's attendance skyrocketed in response to the anticipated oil vote, and an increased partnership between KHH, Surfrider, Sierra Club, the Stanford Alumni Association and Heal the Bay.

Armato, whose husband and two young children stood by her side as she answered questions and organized volunteers, was very happy with the turnout.

Hands Across the Sand is an annual event, sponsored by both the Sierra Club and the Surfrider Foundation nationally, as well as environmental organizations Oceana, CleanEnergy.org, Chart 411, Gulf Restoration Network and Center for a Sustainable Coast. Its purpose is to "say no to dirty fuels and yes to clean energy," according to the Hands Across the Sand website.

The first Hands Across the Sand gathering took place in 2010 by a Floridian man named Dave Rauschkolb. Since then, it's grown as local communities look for ways to voice their concerns about fossil fuels.

Rauschkolb said he founded the event "to bring awareness about the dangers inherent in securing and burning dirty fuels and to champion a new era of clean energy for a sustainable planet for our children and theirs."

This year, events took place from Miami and Seattle to Kangaroo Island in South Australia. There were events in Germany, Kenya, Pakistan, Serbia, Egypt and New Zealand, and related Hands Across the Land events against fracking in the central United States.

Sarah Sikich, Science and Policy Director for Heal the Bay, said her organization was eager to support Surfrider and Sierra Club this year as California communities tied Hands Across the Sand to current events that spoke to residents who are living in cities faced with fracking, oil spills and proposed drilling projects.

“I think it helps when there’s actually something oil related to bring people out,” said Sikich. “We had a really diverse community here. There were folks from Panorama City, Lincoln Heights, downtown L.A. It wasn’t just local folks who came out.”

That was good news for local businesses, as well as residents hoping to feel heard and supported throughout the region.

With congressional elections drawing near, the gathering also brought out a few aspiring politicians - Marianne Williamson and Betsy Butler joined in to express their public opposition to the oil project.

In reaction to the event, E&B Natural Resources Spokesperson Eric Rose said his company looks forward to continuing a fact-based discussion on the impacts of the proposed project “and the unprecedented contribution to the financial stability and future of Hermosa Beach.”

Rose pointed to “diligent oversight from local, state and federal agencies” should the project be approved, and said the directional drilling technology that E&B would use “is proven safe.”

He felt it was important for residents to keep the conversations going.

“E&B believes that one of the most important things about this process is that Hermosa Beach residents do have a choice,” Rose said.

A simple majority vote for residents to decide whether or not to lift the city’s current oil drilling ban is expected in November, pending the final Environmental Impact Report and a ballot measure.

Jose Bacallao, Operations Manager of Heal the Bay, said he is hopeful but unconvinced that anti-oil protesters would emerge victorious over oil supporters by a very large margin. He said while many oil protesters feel confident they’re ahead, he knows that elections depend heavily on turnout and undeclared voters, and he hopes both break in the anti-oil direction as the election draws closer.