NATIONAL OCEANIC AND ATMOSPHERIC ADMINISTRATION
VOICES ORAL HISTORY ARCHIVES

IN PARTNERSHIP WITH
NOAA HERITAGE AND THE NATIONAL WEATHER SERVICE

AN INTERVIEW WITH DAVID KENNEDY
FOR THE
NOAA 50th ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

INTERVIEW CONDUCTED BY
MOLLY GRAHAM

MADISON, VIRGINIA
OCTOBER 6, 2021

TRANSCRIPT BY
FANTASTIC TRANSCRIPTS

Molly Graham: This begins an oral history interview with David Kennedy for the NOAA 50th Oral History Project. This is our second session, and the date is October 6, 2021. It's a remote interview with Mr. Kennedy in Madison, Virginia. The interviewer is Molly Graham, and I'm in Scarborough, Maine. We had talked quite a bit last time about the *Exxon Valdez* oil spill. There were a few other oil spills that I wanted to ask you about and get a sense of what you remember and what your role in the response was. So, rewinding a little bit, I wanted to ask about the Ixtoc oil well blowout. That was 1979.

David Kennedy: Yes. That was the blowout in the Bay of Campeche in Mexico, correct?

MG: I don't have the location in my notes.

DK: Yes. I was deeply involved in that spill, as you know. It was a major blowout that went on for a long, long time. I can't recall how much oil was released, but I think at that time, it probably was the most oil that had been spilled anywhere. By this point, we had a response team. We all went to Texas, staged from Texas, and spent a good deal of time trying to monitor and predict if and/or when the oil would impact the United States because it was far, far down the Yucatan Peninsula, where the blowout occurred. But as time went by, the spill actually moved slowly up the coast. Eventually, it did arrive on US beaches. By this point, the oil had degraded, but nonetheless, it did arrive on US beaches. We spent then a lot of time monitoring the currents offshore. There is what's known as a current reversal off the Texas coast. It's a seasonal thing. We went out daily and looked very carefully at that current to see when it would reverse and, if so, how that would impact the oil that was already coming to the United States. I was involved in the team that went out almost daily in a helicopter with a series of current probes. We would get out into where the current was, and then we would drop currents and then measure and monitor that. That was my major role. At one point, I ended up doing a trip to the area where the spill occurred with the idea of doing an overflight. A NOAA [National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration] P-3had been doing some work, and so I went to – I had a rough assignment; I went to Acapulco with another oceanographer, waited for a P3 to arrive, and we did cliff diving and what have you until [inaudible] as the aircraft arrived. We got in the P3 and actually then flew over the site. Mexico was quite restrictive in who they let go in or around where the spill had occurred. So it was a great opportunity for us to see firsthand the oil that was still coming up. I think we were also involved in trying to evaluate different cleanup techniques, but in particular, beyond cleanup, how to actually stop the blowout from occurring or to capture the oil as it came out of the blowout. We were involved in discussions with many technicians, engineers, and countries, looking at – there was a sombrero-type device that they wanted to lower over where the blowout was occurring and then catch the oil off the top of the sombrero and pump it into ships and a variety of other types of proposals from different places. That's really what I remember. I spent an awful long time there. It was an international event, and we were deeply involved. That's probably all I can recall at the moment.

MG: Then the other one I wanted to ask about was the *New Carissa.*

DK: The *New Carissa* – this was a spill off the coast of Oregon, as I remember. I was not deeply involved in that at that point. I can't remember why, but I did not – I think it was because I had moved up the food chain and was more of an administrator and less of a day-to-day field-

type guy. So, NOAA [and] the scientific support team was deeply involved for a long time in the *New Carissa* – major event – but I was pretty much removed. I got briefings on it but wasn't directly involved much myself.

MG: Forgive me for jumping around in the timeline. I also wanted to ask you about the involvement in the Persian Gulf War. I know that the NOAA Corps sent a ship over there, but how were you managing the oil there?

DK: I was involved in the Persian Gulf War, not on-site, although we did send an initial team, a scientific support coordinator there. I was not that person. In fact, I was slated to go and be that person, but I got very sick. We had to replace me with someone else. But I spent a good deal of time in the early stages of that event at Coast Guard headquarters in Washington, DC. We had a small team that was actually working directly with the Coast Guard, who were managing the spill from headquarters. I was part of that team. We spent a good deal of time trying to find ways to better monitor the spills and what was going on. We were working with different agencies to find satellite coverage and what have you. We were involved in the briefings with the Coast Guard on a daily basis. Again, there's a very high level at the Coast Guard headquarters. Then, over time, yes, NOAA continued to be deeply involved. In fact, are still involved. But we did send a ship over, and it did a research cruise in and about the Gulf. Since then, we have continued to go back and monitor beaches and environments that were impacted to look into recovery. That's being done by contractors for NOAA. I just very recently was contacted by someone who is writing a book on that spill, and they wanted to talk about what NOAA did and was involved with. I was not aware until I started snooping around that we still do routine visits to that area to look at the impacts from that spill.

MG: Neat. You might also want to point them in the direction of the Voices Oral History Archive. We have a whole collection on the *Mount Mitchell*.

DK: Yes, *Mount Mitchell*. Yes, indeed. Captain Richard Permenter was the CO [commanding officer] of the ship, and I still talk to him on occasion.

MG: Yes, he was interviewed.

DK: Sylvia Earle was involved with that as well. Do you know who Sylvia Earle is?

MG: Yes.

DK: Okay. She was involved and spent time on the vessel or at least meeting with the Saudis and others in the region at that time.

MG: She's someone we would love to interview as well.

DK: She is an incredibly interesting person. If you could get an interview with her, you would really, really enjoy it. She's what I call a "piece of work."

MG: Finally, I wanted to ask you about the BP oil spill. What was your role at that time? This is 2010. What do you remember about that time period?

DK: We're talking *Deepwater Horizon*?

MG: Yes.

DK: I had moved on at that point when that spill occurred, and I was no longer with the Office of Response and Restoration. I believe, at that point, I was the acting assistant administrator for the National Ocean Service, and the administrator of NOAA at that time was Jane Lubchenco. Interestingly enough, Jane is now back at the Office of Science and Technology and Policy at the White House, doing climate change work, and is deeply involved in Arctic issues. So, I still interact with Dr. Lubchenco on Arctic stuff, but from obviously a totally different place. So, what happened is a big spill, obviously going to be huge. Most of the components of NOAA were going to be involved one way or another, whether it was specific weather or fisheries issues, or you name it. So, Jane Lubchenco reached out to me and said, "I need somebody to manage NOAA's response here. Given all of your background, I want you to become …" I don't know. They ended up calling me the commander, but basically to be the point, to be the oversight, to be the person in charge of managing all of NOAA's activities and assets in response to BP/*Deepwater Horizon*. I ended up setting up a command center at the Department of Commerce, where NOAA's headquarters are, staffed it with, probably in the end, fifteen to twenty people – from there, managed, to the best of my ability, all the involvement of NOAA in the spill. That included aircraft, ships, folks – it ended up, as the oil came ashore – they established response stations all along the Texas coast. At each one, NOAA would put a team in place at those centers. As I recall, there were centers from Brownsville all the way through Alabama, not quite as far as Florida. Anyway, I was the big picture guy. I spent a lot of time briefing dignitaries of one sort or another, responding to Congress, but also just making sure that NOAA was all coordinated and talking to each other as we did that work. I made a few visits to the Gulf to see firsthand what was going on. But really, my days consisted of seven or eight in the morning at the latest getting into our command center and doing sixteen hours a day, seven days a week for a long, long time.

MG: Were you involved at all in the public relations side of things? I vaguely remember it being a confusing time, where people were arguing about the government's role in the spill, who should be responsible. I think Kevin Costner invented some kind of vacuum cleaner for oil. It was a chaotic time.

DK: I was involved. I did press interviews – some. It was a huge problem. What happened was, as this became more and more nationally and internationally significant, there was a fair amount of control put on who could talk to the press within the federal government. On top of that, most of the very, very specific experts were just absolutely swamped with trying to actually respond to this spill and didn't have much time to talk to the press. A combination of those two things led to a real vacuum with the press, and by that, I mean, as you well know, the press is twenty-four/seven now for news, and they want it all the time, and they're going to get it somewhere. What started happening more and more and more is that people not very close to the spill, not very familiar with spill response, and certainly not engaged in this spill response

became experts in their own mind and freely communicated with the press. We spent lots and lots of time trying to debunk the stories that were coming out from people that really should never have been trying to talk about the spill. But when the press had nobody else to go to, these people spoke in authoritative terms about what was going on and what was going to happen and where. That's what the press ate up because that was what they had available to them. As a result, as I mentioned, a tremendous amount of time was spent trying to undo false narratives that were developed by these so-called "experts." That actually led to a conference after the fact, where we brought in the press, and we discussed the dilemma that occurred there and how we might do something about it. We also had academics who were independent of the spill, who got involved in doing research, and without any consultation or, again, connection to the spill, were making some pretty wild claims about what they were seeing and doing and thinking. That, too, led to a discussion that's been ongoing about how we better engage the academic community in a large event like this and make sure that they somehow are familiar with how response works and [are] on the same page if you will.

MG: That's interesting. I want to make sure that I'm capturing all the steps in your career and resume without skipping anything. What year did you leave the Office of Response and Restoration? Is that when you moved into the deputy undersecretary role or another position within NOS?

DK: Another position within NOS. At some point, the existing assistant administrator of NOS felt like the Coastal Zone Management Program was not doing well. It's one of the few programs buried within a line office that actually has a political appointee or did have a political appointee. They had a political appointee there who wasn't maybe doing the best that could be done for the Coastal Zone Management Program. So, I was asked to become the director of OCRM, Office of Coastal Resource Management for the Coastal Zone Management Program. So, I left OR&R, and my next position was director of OCRM.

MG: Do you remember what year that was?

DK: Gosh, no. I'm sorry. I don't. I have a really hard time with years. I wouldn't even hazard a guess.

MG: Tell me a little bit about that role. I don't have too much in my notes about that position.

DK: So that program, basically, is designed to work with each state and their coastal zone and to try and make appropriate decisions on how to manage the coast. That included development. It included all sorts of environmental issues associated with it. So there are coastal zone managers in the states. Collectively then, we worked with those coastal zone managers in all of those states to adjudicate, administer programs, projects, and activities on the coast in all those places. The real power was with the individual state managers, but we were involved in any and all kinds of issues. I can recall, in California, the Navy wanted to do exercises off the coast that included sonic booms and things like that. The state of California [was] very concerned about that as it relates to marine mammal populations, in particular. We – headquarters, state coastal zone, and the Navy – had many, many, many meetings to try and adjudicate how those exercises

would work and what constraints the Navy might be held to, to make sure that the coastal zone of the state of California was protected.

MG: How long were you in this position?

DK: Again, I'm terrible; I should go back and try and plot all those, but not all that long. Maybe a couple of years. Two or three years at the most. Because what happened is the NOS deputy assistant administrator position had a problem, and I was asked to go and fill in as the deputy assistant administrator of NOS. So I'm not sure that I was actually removed from that position, but I basically left it and went to what would be considered the headquarters of the National Ocean Service to become the deputy. I did that for a while. There was some controversy about that position and what was going on. There was just some controversy in general with NOS and its leadership and management at that point. From the deputy position, I ended up being the acting assistant administrator when the AA [assistant administrator] was asked to move on. There's just a whole sequence of short-term positions that I held as acting, leading up to becoming the assistant administrator.

MG: Can you talk a little bit about your purview at this point and the different things you were doing?

DK: So with NOS, as deputy and then the assistant administrator, there'd been a long-standing problem with headquarters taking a lot of money and autonomously doing stuff that didn't necessarily line up with all of the different programs. We had Sanctuaries. We had OCRM. We had coast mapping, and so on and so forth. There was a lot of overhead going to headquarters without maybe justification of what those funds were used for. There was a fair amount of discontent about headquarters and its management, and the overhead that it charged, and what you got out of that. In addition, a number of the programs were pretty autonomous; there was not really a cohesive way forward within NOS. There were individual programs that really did a variety of things that weren't very closely related. They just ran without being part of the team, if you will. The major thing that I did throughout my time at NOS was cut a bunch of the people that I didn't feel were being very productive at headquarters out, reduced the overhead, and then worked to get the different programs within NOS to be more of a cohesive unit and communicate with one another and cross-pollinate and that sort of thing. So that's it in a few sentences. As I'm sure you are probably aware, when you have an institution that is pretty set in its ways and has done things a certain way for a long time, you don't change all those things I mentioned without a fair amount of effort and time and engagement with everybody to try and make that happen. That was the major undertaking that I did. That drew an awful lot of attention from NOAA headquarters that I had tackled this and was really changing the paradigm, if you will, of what NOS did, how it got managed, and where the funds went. That eventually led to an interest in me coming downtown to move up in the chain.

MG: I imagine there was some pushback or resistance to your efforts within NOS.

DK: Yes, there certainly was, not only from people in headquarters, who'd been there, doing their thing for a long time without interference, but obviously, pushing back on the programs, to tell them that they couldn't just continue to be in their own little world without becoming part of

the team, engaged in the team, and investing in the team. So, yes, pushback from a lot of different places.

MG: This might be a clunky question, but in what ways did you engage across the NOAA portfolio?

DK: Well, that was another thing – trying to engage with the other line offices in a more specific way, becoming more of a partner and providing our expertise and looking more closely at what the other line officers had to offer and try and bring that into our portfolio as well. That was all part of this concept of NOS, but a NOAA team and getting everybody to play well together.

MG: Was it while you were working in headquarters that you started shifting some of your focus to the Arctic and research looking into the impact of oil drilling?

DK: Yes. That really occurred mostly after – I had had experience, as I think I mentioned, on Arctic issues, starting with the Air Force and all the time that I flew in and out around the Arctic. My more specific and direct engagement on the Arctic did start after I moved to headquarters. I had had a variety of jobs, where the Arctic was, in fact, part of my beat, if you will. I had a pretty good background in the Arctic. But the specific beginnings of the transition to more Arctic started when I was moved to headquarters and the deputy undersecretary. It was during that time that Shell was developing their offshore drilling program in Alaska. What we found is that NOAA, again, had many entities within it that were working on providing the information, advice, and sometimes approval for the Shell effort. As we began to get more and more involved, the issue became really a national issue. What we found is that the different components of NOAA weren't talking to each other. We would find that the National Marine Fisheries Service [NMFS] had gone to Shell and said, "Here are the following things that we want you to do." Then we would find out another part of NOAA was contradicting or sending a different kind of message to Shell, and that NOAA did not have a comprehensive understanding of who all was playing in the Arctic, and certainly they weren't coordinated once we did know who all were playing. There was, at that point, an undertaking to try and get somebody in NOAA to be the point person for understanding who all the players were on the Arctic in NOAA and getting them on the same page. During that time, there was also the National Strategy for the Arctic Region, and I represented NOAA in those deliberations. There were several things going on in the Arctic, but the one key piece is this idea that we needed to have a spokesperson and oversight leader, if you will, on the Arctic because we weren't on the same page. At that point, that person was assigned to the NOAA Chief of Staff – not me, someone else. I was involved. But at that point, as the deputy undersecretary, my plate was very, very full. Basically, that position oversees all operations of NOAA wherever and whenever and handles all controversies, IG [inspector general] investigations, on and on and on. Because we'd had some difficulty in relationships with the Department of Commerce, I was also spending a good deal of time down the hall actually working and talking at least on a weekly basis with the Department of Commerce to make sure that we were on the same page. So, I was involved in the Arctic, but I certainly wasn't the leader; that was someone else. Like I said, the National Strategy and all sorts of other things. But then, at some point, I decided to retire. As I retired, the administrator at that point was Kathy Sullivan. I had a very good relationship with her. She said, "Look, should you want to come back after you retire, I'll bet there's something we could find for you to

do if you wanted." At that point, managing the Arctic was a part-time job for a chief-of-staff person, who too was going to depart or had departed; I can't remember which. So long story short. I did retire. I did not like it. I found that my motor was still running pretty fast. Going into retirement just wasn't suited for me. I contacted Kathy Sullivan and said I'd be interested in coming back. We talked about it. The Arctic was still a pretty significant issue and really wasn't being managed full-time or even really very much part-time. We decided that I would come back and take on the role of trying to make sure that NOAA was well-coordinated and organized around our Arctic issues. I was brought back and given the title of – I don't remember what – senior Arctic advisor to the administrator, I think is what it was called.

MG: I want to go back a little bit. In another interview you did, you talked about how Shell came to NOAA for advice. You said the Shell talk made a lot of people at NOAA "nervous." Can you say why or how?

DK: Well, Shell was getting ready to drill offshore. There's a lot of potential issues with drilling offshore. It was clear at that time and remains that way today, that if you had a major accident, an oil spill offshore in ice – oil and ice – we did not have the expertise, the technology, the ability to really clean up a spill if it happened in oil and ice. I think there's some concern about us supporting and promoting Shell when, in fact, we knew very, very well – and we weren't alone. The Commandant of the Coast Guard publicly has said right up to the last Commandant, Admiral [Paul F.] Zukunft, that we are not prepared or ready to respond to a spill in oil and ice. I think there's concern that what we were doing was supporting an issue that, if it went south, would be pretty much an environmental disaster.

MG: You also talked about implementing this Arctic strategy for NOAA. These kinds of efforts are often herculean – coordinating schedules, personalities, efforts, talking points, and then drafting the ultimate report. So what did that process look like? How long did it take?

DK: Well, when we first started with this, and this is now [when] I'm there full-time as the senior advisor and working for the administrator, which was very significant. Senior advisor with the ear of the administrator gets a lot more cooperation than maybe later when I just became the senior advisor but was buried in a line office. That took away some of my ability to maneuver and gather the right people and get them to do the right thing because I no longer really had much authority at all. But in the beginning, we had a team that was very enthusiastic. We developed a strategy. I can't remember how long it took. But it was really a very effective cross-cutting group that was very motivated. We came up with a great plan initially. It just required bringing all the line offices together, making sure that all the issues that they were addressing in the Arctic were included, and that we, working with a broader Arctic community, included and incorporated what NOAA was doing and where it needed to go. The first plan was, I thought, just an excellent plan. I don't know if you've seen it or not. I think you can still find it online. It was very publicly oriented. It had lots of nice pictures, and I thought we had some great direction and goals within it. It got a little stale over time, and we had a problem getting it revised. That's what I was still trying to do when I finally left NOAA again at the end of my term. This is now during the [Donald] Trump Administration, and there wasn't a lot of interest in revising the plan at that point. Certainly, the fact that I now – I was moved from headquarters to OAR, Oceanic and Atmospheric Research, and then buried within that. Again, I didn't really

have much authority at that point. I still convene meetings. We still discuss issues. We still try to make sure that we are engaged nationally and internationally. There was a lot of work associated with that. But in terms of really moving the NOAA ball at that point, there wasn't as much interest. Obviously, within the Trump administration, the idea of resource development in Alaska was more important than having a new Arctic strategy.

MG: I'm a little curious about your life outside of NOAA and how it has unfolded over all these years. There must have been so many disruptions with the travel and the moving. I was also curious about how you ended up retiring in Virginia when you had that land in Seattle.

DK: Oh, boy. Let's see. Certainly, I was on the go and absent from my family life a lot, sometimes weeks and months, with maybe a short return home and then turn around and have to go back again. That was just a way of life throughout most of my earlier career and up until I became the assistant administrator at NOS and then went downtown to be the DUSO [Deputy Under Secretary for Operations]. I've always had two residences: one, my primary residence, and the second more recreational. I am a carpenter and a woodworker. I've had sawmills in my second properties most of my life, so I mill my own lumber and stuff like that. That was my relaxation. Even when I was home, I quite often would immediately try and go to my second property because that's where I could really relax. It certainly affected and complicated my personal and family life over the course of my career.

MG: I'm curious about those three months of retirement, the first time you retired. I'm surprised it was such a short period of time. What took place that made you want to go back to work so quickly?

DK: The kinds of things that I was doing as the deputy undersecretary, as I had in my previous life, were not addressing specific environmental issues, big topics of how do you manage the coast of California, or how do you respond to this oil spill and the recovery and restoration and damage assessment? It was more, as I've mentioned – okay, you got a ship broke down. How are you going to get that fixed? And you got a schedule that you're going to have to manage and change. There was a lot of politics associated with it. It was trying to answer all of the problems in NOAA, problems of every different kind you could imagine – sexual harassment issues, you name it. That's what I was doing day-to-day. I was in a situation where I would get in before eight o'clock in the morning and have thirty-minute meetings with maybe a half-hour for lunch until five or six at night every day. So just back-to-back-to-back-to-back-to-back-to-back. I didn't enjoy a lot of what I had to do as the deputy undersecretary. I was quite flattered and honored that I was selected to do it, and I think I did a pretty good job, but it wasn't my cup of tea. That's what drove me out, is I don't want to do this anymore. This is just a lot of stuff that there's not a lot of rewards for most of them. I just was convinced that it wasn't right for me and that I should get out. So, I did. Once I got out, I realized that I'd had a tremendous career and been involved in all sorts of fun things. I was still going a mile a minute after I got out – the energy and the involvement. Like I said, thirty-minute meetings all day long every day. I retired to my residence in DC, but I spent a good deal of my time out in the country, in Virginia. What I realized very quickly is I did not like not having something important to do on a regular basis and having long periods of time when I didn't necessarily get any emails telling me that I needed to be here or there or get involved in this and that. I wasn't ready to quit. I would end up sitting

around tapping my foot a lot, going, "Okay, okay. Now what? Now what?" And there wasn't any "what." My motor was still running, and I realized that I wanted to still be engaged in something. That's when I went back to Kathy Sullivan and said, "You know what? I think I would like to come back. What do you say we do the Arctic?" And she agreed.

MG: Can you say a little bit more about what you accomplished as a senior policy advisor for the Arctic region. I was curious to hear more about the Arctic Science Ministerial that you helped develop and how that all came together.

DK: I can't remember exactly where the idea started. But I'm guessing it probably started with the guy who was the Arctic guy at the White House at that time. His name was Mark Brzezinski. Does that name ring a bell with you? It turns out he's the brother of Mika Brzezinski, the woman that is on *Morning Joe*, the news show. But a fantastic guy. He had been the ambassador to Sweden at some point before he came into this job. High Energy. [He] really was promoting the Arctic. So again, I don't remember exactly, but I'm pretty sure it was his idea. The idea was it takes a village. We're only one of many, many nations that have the Arctic and are involved in the Arctic. Wouldn't it be great for us to get everybody together and talk a little bit about what the important issues are and how collectively we can address them and move forward? That was the basis then for the first Arctic Science Ministerial, and it was a tremendous experience to craft how this would work, how the US would manage and facilitate it, how we would engage all the other countries, and then how we would develop the agenda and the priorities. Again, a huge undertaking, not only to continuously meet with all of the agencies within the United States who do the Arctic but meeting, after meeting, after meeting with high-level scientists and experts from all the different countries to get them on board. Also, a significant effort at that point to make sure that we included indigenous – which I think has become more and more important over time – but include indigenous involvement and engagement. I don't know that you recall, but there was actually a separate indigenous gathering when we had the ministerial at the White House. Excuse me. This is more toxic than I normally do.

MG: Do you want to take a quick break? I think we're in the homestretch.

DK: No, let's keep going.

MG: I wondered if you could reflect a bit on NOAA's vision for the Arctic region. I'm also thinking about some of the technology developments that have taken place related to monitoring this region.

DK: Well, there's observing as a big O, and an umbrella topic [and] is a big part of what NOAA is about for the Arctic. Most of the types of work that NOAA does in the Arctic, and that's everything from sea ice forecasting, to fisheries management, to a bunch of the ecosystem studies that go on, really are based on the observing that's done to generate the information and data about what's going on and the change that's taking place. Observing is one of the major components of what NOAA is involved with. The Arctic is a tough place to do observing compared to a lot of other parts of the country. It's a no-brainer as to why that is. But with the ice and the harsh weather and the darkness, and so on and so forth. You have to get creative.

The observing that's done is terribly expensive compared to most places, and it's limited in terms of what you can do. As a result, it limits the comprehensive time-critical research and science and results that NOAA can generate. So, we've been involved for a long time with ships. The Coast Guard has an icebreaker that just did a cruise, the *Healy*, where we had NOAA people on board. We have an observation location in what used to be Barrow, which is now Utqiagvik. Satellites are another big part of how we do observations. But your question about innovation and technology – that has been, for many, many years, a topic that's explored. How can we do a better and cheaper way to make observations? There's a lot of development that's taken place with ROVs [remotely operated underwater vehicles], AUVs [autonomous underwater vehicles], drones. We have almost like a surfboard; it is much bigger than that with a sail on it that autonomously can go out. It's launched from Dutch Harbor in the past. It goes all the way up through the Bering Straits and into the Arctic during the summer, taking a whole variety of observations. That's fairly new. That certainly has all been developed and become operational during my time there. Again, AUVs, RUVs, drones – a lot of effort there. We're always searching now for new technology to fill in the gaps to make it more reasonable to get the data that we need. I don't know. I'm winding down there.

MG: One thing I didn't ask you about was your involvement in marine debris cleanup and the Marine Debris Project.

DK: I can't remember where I was. I guess I must have been in the Office of Response and Restoration. But nonetheless, NOAA acquired funding for a marine debris program, the only marine debris program in the United States that the federal government manages. I was the head of it at that point. We developed a program to begin to understand where and how marine debris is generated, where it shows up, and how to collect it. We had folks that were assigned to different regions of the country. We ended up having a major discussion when Japan had its tsunami that wiped everything out and created marine debris that ultimately ended up in the US, in Alaska. We were involved in all of their predictions on if or when that debris would show up and then what to do about it. We actually funded debris cleanup in Alaska. It was a fascinating program. We worked with NGOs. Some NGOs [non-governmental organizations] are quite active in that arena and have annual cleanups, and we helped sponsor and were involved in those kinds of things. I wasn't involved too long before we got another director involved, and I was peripheral to it after a while. But again, a fascinating program. I don't know. Maybe one of the most interesting parts of it was the Northwestern Hawaiian Islands; they're pristine islands, not populated at all, and yet, there was a gyre there from the North Pacific that comes down through those islands. Those beautiful little islands out there at the end of the chain, if you will, are teeth in a comb when it comes to debris, in particular, fishing debris from the North Pacific. These islands – I don't know if you've done any research there or looked – would get stacked feet high with debris on these beautiful pristine places. Not only that, but the debris was compromising some of these species that were there, seals in particular, and birds ingesting plastic and getting caught in the netting, and turtles, and you name it. We had a major undertaking to go to those islands with barges and ships, and cleanup crews that [included] divers as well and go through and actually clean up all that debris. We worked out a deal where that debris came back to the mainland and was used as fuel in some of the generators for electricity for the islands. We were able to actually use some of that debris to generate power for Hawaii. The sad part of that story is that – and we did this over a two or three year period [and] targeted different islands to do the

cleanup – got it all cleaned up, and within just a few years, you can go back and look, and it's all there again. It's completely built back in from the continuing debris that we have. So, that's marine debris.

MG: Is there anything I'm missing up to when you retired again in 2020?

DK: Probably, but I can't remember what it would be. I was a representative to IMO [International Maritime Organization] in London for a while, which was very fascinating – in developing marine policy – just fascinating to see how all that works in a United Nations-like setting. I can't think. There are probably other things. I've done a bunch of stuff.

MG: What went into your decision to retire again in 2020? Did it have anything to do with the COVID pandemic that had really first ramped up around then?

DK: Actually, it didn't. It was, I'd say, serendipitous; that isn't it at all. For some time, and I've referenced this, I was put on the shelf by the Trump folks and pushed further and further away from really being able to very effectively do my job. We had one of the deputy assistant secretaries decide that he really could do the Arctic himself, that he didn't really need anybody to help, that it could be done without my position. We'd stalled out on trying to redo the strategy, and the writing was just on the wall. At that point, I had become much less effective and knew that and. Not only that, but then I put in a significant number of years after I retired-retired. So, I was much more ready to retire. Given the Trump administration and the position that I got to, it just made it easier to say, "Okay, time to wrap it up." So, I did. It was a combination of things but had a good deal to do with how the position had really been diminished over the course of the Trump years.

MG: Can you tell me about USARC [United States Arctic Research Commission] and how that came up for you?

DK: Yes. A couple of things happened. There is a small but powerful Arctic community, if you will, in all the different agencies from NSF [National Science Foundation] to [Department of the] Interior, to you name it. I had a really nice set of relationships going with folks throughout the Arctic community. As I got ready to retire, I still was talking to my folks, other contacts. The Wilson Center [Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars] is how this started. The director of the Polar Institute at the Wilson Center contacted me and asked if I might be interested in becoming a fellow at the Wilson Center. I was very interested in that. I thought that was a nice touch to being retired and still keep my hand in a little bit. I agreed to that and was approved by their council and became a Wilson Center [fellow]. At the same time, I was still talking to the executive director of the US Arctic Research Commission, and all of the commissioners basically were gone towards the end of the Trump administration. This guy, the executive director, and I had become close and communicated on a regular basis. Even after I retired, I had a call with him every few weeks, and he asked if I might be interested in the commission because they were looking for new appointees. I also have kept in contact with Ted Stevens' wife, Catherine Stevens. Ted Stevens was a mentor and supporter of mine throughout most of my career from Exxon Valdez on, and I had routine meetings with Catherine as well. She'd become a good friend. I mentioned USARC to her [and] that there was some interest

(from me?). But you have to be appointed by somebody. You don't just say, "Hey, okay, I'll be a commissioner." She's very close to the Alaska delegation. Basically, when I mentioned to her that I might be interested, she said, "Let me try and help." I actually was appointed by Senator [Daniel Scott] Sullivan, the junior senator from Alaska – nominated, not appointed – nominated. You have to be appointed by the President. That led then to a long, arduous filling out paperwork and doing interviews and what have you. This would be off the record, I think.

MG: Let me turn the recorder off. [Tape paused.] Go ahead.

DK: Having been appointed by Trump, it was quite a surprise to receive a letter – or not really a letter – a directive. It was a sheet of paper from the President, saying, "You are now selected as the chair of the US Arctic Research Commission, effective immediately." It was quite a surprise, but they removed the chair that Trump had appointed and put me in there.

MG: Who else was on USARC?

DK: There are seven commissioners, voting commissioners. At the point that I was named chair, every commissioner had been appointed by Trump. We had one person that lived in Alaska and had a lot of Arctic experience. No, I'm sorry. We had two people. We had an indigenous person and one other person. The remaining commissioners were from Tennessee, Texas, Florida – I'm missing one other. But most of them certainly weren't academic with Arctic experience or background, and few of them beyond Arctic research had much of any other connection with the Arctic and Alaska. That was the commission to start. This White House expressed concerns almost from the beginning that they had appointed commissioners with little or no background or experience. I'm assuming you are aware that a month or so ago, the White House removed four of the commissioners for lack of expertise and experience on the Arctic.

MG: Yes.

DK: Okay. A week or so ago, maybe two, there was a White House announcement naming the new commissioners, and those commissioners have an extensive background in the Arctic. There was an attempt to fix the gender [disparity] as well as residents. I think now four of the commissioners are Alaska residents, and all of them have a lot of experience.

MG: Have you remained the chair?

DK: No. In fact, when the President named me as the chair, I said I would do it because I thought I could do a better job than the guy they had named [chair] who had no experience. But if we got new commissioners, I would like only to be the interim chair, and I'd like someone else to be assigned for a variety of reasons. I've been there and done that. I thought a younger, more connected, hard-charging person could really move the commission a lot further than I could, given where I was living and given the fact that I am semi-retired. So, the new chair – I actually recommended the new chair and was thrilled that they named the guy that I suggested that I thought would do a fantastic job.

MG: How long do you plan on staying on the commission? What things do you hope to accomplish?

DK: So in the announcement a week or two ago of the other of the new commissioners, I also was included in that announcement. My term had actually expired, and it's a complicated story, but they have the commissioners' terms staggered so that they always have commissioners that have experience on the commission. The term that I was assigned to by Trump expired in February. So, the term that I was in had expired. In this announcement, it was announced that I was selected for a new three-year term that had just started.

MG: How do you picture the next three years unfolding? What more do you hope to do?

DK: In wanting to get out of the chair, I had two or three things that I was interested in focusing on. One of those is trying to do a better job of integrating indigenous people into research, local knowledge, and actually conducting research themselves. That's a huge topic that we haven't addressed very well yet. That's one I want to work on. Another topic is law of the sea. I have an interest in law of the sea and US involvement. We are not a signatory to law of the sea, as you may know. But we have been working for a long time on trying to develop the background information data, you name it, to actually make a request to the law of the sea counsel for extended continental shelf sovereignty in seven different locations around the United States, one the Bering Sea and another the Arctic. So, law of the sea would be two. And three, there is a new – actually not new – an old organization that was an executive order under Obama that Trump did away with, but it's been since put back by [Joseph] Biden – [Northern Bering Sea Climate Resilience Area] is what it's called. In essence, it says that that area of the Bering Straits is extremely sensitive and affected by climate change to date, that as we move forward and decisions on resource development, maritime shipping, other activities – that area has become more and more vulnerable due to climate change. A commission or committee needs to be formed that includes indigenous and then federal agencies to oversee and look carefully at decisions that are made about any further development in that arena. Again, that was started as an executive order at the end of the Obama administration. I was one of the co-chairs of that group when it started. Then, of course, Trump did away with it. But the first day that Biden was in office, he re-instituted that executive order, and I'm hoping to work on that as well.

MG: Good. I just have three more quick questions.

DK: Okay.

MG: This project is to document NOAA's history. I'm wondering if you can reflect a little bit on its legacy and accomplishments from your perspective in the many years you spent with the agency.

DK: What has NOAA accomplished? What are the highlights? Is that what you're saying?

MG: Yeah. I'm wondering if you can reflect on its impact, its legacy, and what it's meant to you personally.

DK: First of all, it's a fantastic agency in terms of the kinds of things that it does, the data and information that really are significant and important to understanding the environment. Without NOAA, there's just a number of things that would be gaping holes, from weather to fisheries to other research. Second would be the dedication of the employees of NOAA. It's just an incredibly dedicated group that absolutely believes in what they're doing and why they're doing it. The esprit de corps, the camaraderie, and the dedication to mission, I think, is exceptional within NOAA. Beyond that, where would I go? It's just an agency that really is focused on the ecosystem of the planet, and providing data that help make decisions about everything under the sun – makes it, I think, a very unique organization. It's interesting it's under the Department of Commerce. A good deal of information and data that are generated do help commerce, but there's a long story about how it ended up under the Department of Commerce instead of other places. That's, I guess, what I would characterize.

MG: I also want to ask you about your experience during the COVID pandemic and what the last nearly two years have been like for you.

DK: It is interesting that I retired, really not thinking of COVID when I did it. I just was ready. But within weeks of the time that I retired, it was very clear that COVID was going to drive a good deal of what was going on in this country. I have been here and working virtually on all the issues that we've – well, not all –some of the issues that we've been discussing ever since the pandemic hit. I had a place – I had a condominium in Arlington at the time that I retired. When I came out here, and COVID really took over, I never went back to that condo, period, and ended up selling it virtually without ever stepping back in it and then having people go take my furniture out and bring it out here. I basically stayed out here with one or two exceptions of going into the city this whole time. After some IT [information technology] issues, at least, this system seems to work very well. All my meetings are still done to this moment virtually, either [on] Zoom or just by phone. I really don't feel like I've been terribly impacted in being able to do what I do by being here. The US Arctic Research Commission had decided to hold a fall meeting with members in Fairbanks now a month or two ago. After deciding that, we watched the incidence rates in Fairbanks just skyrocket, just went crazy, and started looking at the percentage of the population there that had gotten their shots, and it was less than fifty percent. We just figured that was way too much of a threat to the commission. We canceled that session as a result.

MG: Do you feel like it's holding you back in some areas of work?

DK: It's always nice to be in person. It adds an aspect of communication and understanding that you don't have. But not really; I don't think it's held back much at all, to tell you the truth.

MG: Good. Is there anything I'm missing? Anything I forgot to ask you about?

DK: Well, again, probably. But you've been pretty thorough as it is. Let me think about it after we hang up. Maybe I can think of something, but right now, no, I can't think of anything.

MG: Sure. It's not hard to schedule a quick call if we need to do an addendum or to add some material to the transcript when we get to that phase.

DK: Okay.

MG: Well, I really want to thank you for all your time and your good work. I appreciate it so much.

DK: Not a problem. It's been interesting to do. It'll be interesting to see what comes to all this. I look forward to that.

MG: Sure. I will be in touch. It might take a couple of months for me to get the transcript to you because I've got a long queue. But I will keep you updated with the process.

DK: Okay, that sounds good.

MG: Thank you so much, Mr. Kennedy.

DK: You bet. Thank you. Bye.

MG: Bye-bye.

----------END OF INTERVIEW----------

Reviewed by Molly Graham 1/16/2022
Reviewed by David Kennedy 2/4/2022
Reviewed by Molly Graham 2/26/2025