

Beyond PR: How Transparency and Collaboration Transformed Oklahoma's Oil and Gas Industry

Mike Cantrell

A third-generation oilman, author, speaker, and energy consultant who brings a unique blend of deep industry experience and political acumen. His journey began with a family legacy forged in Oklahoma's oilfields, where he gained hands-on experience.

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The Oklahoma Energy Resources Board (OERB) is a testament to how an industry can transform its public image through proactive, tangible actions. What began with Mike Cantrell and a friend's bold vision has evolved into a program that not only cleans up thousands of sites but also fosters a crucial partnership between the oil and gas industry and the state of Oklahoma.

The Problem: A Tarnished Public Image

In the 1990s, Oklahoma's oil and gas industry, despite being the state's economic backbone, faced a severe public relations crisis. Public opinion was overwhelmingly negative, with an 86% disapproval rating. Highly publicized pollution incidents had branded the industry as a polluter, and public messages about its positive contributions were dismissed as disingenuous. A survey further highlighted this disconnect, revealing that only one focus group in the state ranked oil and gas among the top ten industries, a stark contrast to its actual economic dominance.

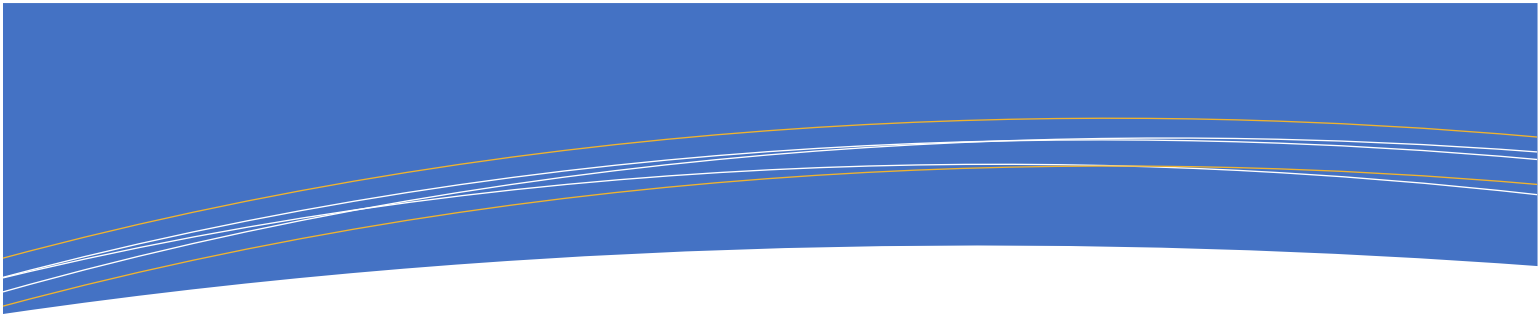


The Solution: A Transparent Approach

Mike Cantrell, a third-generation oilman and industry veteran, recognized that positive messaging alone lacked credibility. He knew the industry had to show, not just tell, the public that the industry was committed to being a good neighbor. He then devised a solution.

Foundational History: The concept of a checkoff list originated with Congressman Wes Watkins. While driving down an Oklahoma road, Watkins turned to Mr. Cantrell, *"The oil and gas industry is hard to help because you're held in such low regard. What you need is a checkoff program like the beef checkoff program to start changing the industry's image with the American public."*

A group of industry leaders attempted to launch a national program but faced opposition from major oil and gas groups in Washington. Undeterred, Mr. Cantrell pivoted to gain support for a state program in Oklahoma, securing champions like Pete Brown, who was a key player in the D.C. effort, Senate Pro Tem Stratton Taylor, Oklahoma Senate Energy Chairman Kevin Easley, Oklahoma House Energy Chairman Larry Rice and OIPA President Mickey Thompson, and James L. Stafford, President of the National Association of Royalty Owners.



A key early step was securing support from the Oklahoma Independent Petroleum Association (OIPA). With Pete Brown as OIPA president, Pete and Mr. Cantrell gained backing with only one dissenting vote. Mickey Thompson, OIPA's executive director, drafted the legislation and helped move it through the legislature. The support of royalty owners was also crucial, and James L. Stafford, a nationally recognized public relations expert and executive director of the National Association of Royalty Owners, played a key role in securing their backing.

The OERB was created as a state-based checkoff program. The oil and gas industry contributes two-tenths of one percent of the value of every barrel of oil and every MCF of natural gas into a fund. This fund is managed by a board of directors consisting of producers, royalty owners, and pipeline companies. As a result, the legislation required that half of all OERB funds be spent on environmental cleanup of past damage sites. While the law requires the collection of these funds, a voluntary refund process is available at the end of each year.

Take ownership, find solutions, and show your progress. This strategy was simple yet revolutionary. Instead of publicizing philanthropic efforts or economic impact, OERB's first advertising campaigns featured landowners whose properties had been cleaned up at no cost to them. This authentic, on-the-ground approach transformed public opinion, raising approval from 14% to 80% within five years.

By owning its problems and displaying how it was fixing them, OERB proved to the industry that had initially opposed the "airing of dirty laundry" that this approach was effective.

A woman from Prague, Oklahoma, who had an earthquake-damaged home, told the press she was not angry because she understood how important the oil and gas industry is to the state.

Her sentiment demonstrates the shift in public perception.

Since its founding, the OERB has:

- Cleaned up more than 17,000 damaged sites across Oklahoma.
- Educated over one million students about the importance of oil and gas.
- Partnered with the State Department of Education to implement a factual, non-political energy curriculum in classrooms.

Lasting Results

The OERB's decades of work and earned credibility paid dividends during the time Oklahoma began experiencing earthquakes linked to wastewater injection. While such events could have severely damaged public trust, the foundation of goodwill built by the OERB helped the industry weather the crisis.

Beyond public relations, OERB's efforts have had a significant economic impact. Because of the trust and partnership it has fostered with the Oklahoma Legislature and the Oklahoma Corporation Commission, the oil and gas industry in Oklahoma has maintained the lowest regulatory costs of any oil-producing state. This has saved the industry billions of dollars, which have been reinvested in drilling and producing more energy. OERB's story is a powerful example of how transparency, accountability, and tangible action can rebuild trust and create lasting benefits for an industry and community.