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Group downplays need for major lab cleanup

Less intrusive measures proposed

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WHAT NEXT?—Factions argue over the best method to clean up the contaminated soil at Rocketdyne.

More harm than good might result if the cleanup at Rocketdyne near [Simi Valley](#) involves the intense removal of top soil at the former test site, the Santa Susana Field Laboratory Community Advisory Group says.

The 2,850-acre Santa Susana Field Lab was used as a nuclear test site and for research in the development of ballistic missiles, rockets and space shuttle equipment. The activity resulted in radiological and chemical contamination of the soil and groundwater at the site. A link to cancer cases in the area has also been alleged.

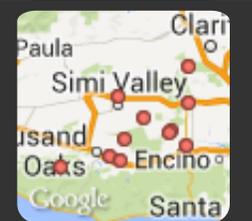
Today, the field laboratory is the focus of a comprehensive environmental investigation and cleanup program, conducted by Boeing, the United States Department of Energy and the National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA), and overseen by the California Department of Toxic Substances Control.

Boeing owns about 80 percent of the site. The federal government owns the remaining 20 percent.

The site has been a rallying cry for anti-nuclear activists and environmentalists, said Abraham Weitzberg, technical co-chair of the Santa Susana Field Lab Community Advisory Group, which was founded last year.

While a small amount of radiological contamination remains, the main contaminants are chemical, said Weitzberg, a nuclear engineer from [Woodland Hills](#) who worked on space reactors at the field lab site

Where's the story?



11 Points Mentioned

in the early 1960s.

Going too far?

Speaking at a recent meeting of the City of Calabasas Environmental Commission, Weitzberg said public perception about the field lab and the dangers it poses to the public needs to change. His group is proposing a less intrusive cleanup plan, which, he says, would protect natural, archeological and historical resources at the site.



“How we got to this

CAUSE FOR CONCERN—Soil contamination at the field lab and surrounding area is the biggest worry.

situation is far less important than how we move forward to implement a truly protective cleanup that does not do more harm than the existing contamination,” Weitzberg said.

Cleanup officials are still deciding which method to use for removing contaminated soil.

One option involves removal of only the soil that poses a risk. A more intense cleanup solution and deeper scrub would return the soil to its natural

state.

John Luker, vice president of the Santa Susana Mountain Park Association, a group dedicated to preserving open spaces in the [Santa Susana Mountains](#) and [Simi Hills](#), said the rocket test site lies inside one of the most important habitat linkages in Southern California.

Removing all the top soil in the area could harm an important wildlife corridor and further endanger the small population of mountain lions struggling to survive in the [Santa Monica Mountains](#), Luker said.

All wildlife roaming south from the [Santa Susana Mountains](#) and into the [Santa Monica Mountains](#) via the Liberty Canyon wildlife crossing in [Agoura Hills](#) will be threatened if its habitat is tampered with, he said.

In 2010, NASA agreed to return the soil on its property to its original state.

But cleaning the soil to “background,” or original state, would devastate the land, making it attractive only to developers, Luker said. About 2.5 million cubic yards of soil on 300 to 400 acres would be scraped down to bedrock.

The larger cleanup could destroy irreplaceable habitat such as an oak forest, as well as Native American rock art and other archeological and historical assets.

“These things are remarkable and should be preserved,” said Luker, who fears the only groups with deep enough pockets to fill in the cleaned-up area with new soil will be builders intent on developing the land.

Full cleanup at the 451-acre NASA site would take four years and cost about \$200 million. The less invasive option—cleaning the soil to a standard suitable for residential and recreational use—would cost about half that amount, a report from the advisory group stated.

Luker said “political forces” are blocking meaningful discussion about what to do with the property after the cleanup.

Dr. Ronald Ziman, a [Bell Canyon](#) resident, neurologist and internist who is on the faculty at UCLA, said the large-scale cleanup might incur health risks for area residents. A large-scale cleanup could trigger valley fever, West Nile virus and equine encephalitis, Ziman said.

“What we’re dealing with is the proposed excavation of hundreds of acres, without any grading or drainage planned,” he said.

Contamination at the field lab site is not as serious as it’s being made out to be, Ziman said. “There is no data that shows there have been deaths of either workers at the site or residents in surrounding communities.”

The Department of Energy is preparing an environmental study for 2015 that will address cleanup of the entire field lab.

To return the soil to its natural state, an estimate 1-million cubic yards would have to be removed at a cost of over \$1 billion.

A different perspective

Four public speakers rebuked the advisory group and urged Calabasas commissioners to listen to their side of the story before making a decision about which cleanup method to endorse.

“I’m deeply concerned about the misinformation that was provided,” said Christina Walsh, founder of an organization called [Cleanuprocketdyne.org](#).

“Shutting our eyes, pretending it didn’t happen . . . is inappropriate and of deep concerns,” Walsh said.

“We should be working for comfortable solutions that work for everyone, not deny the past,” she said.

Today, the cleanup carries implications for a wide area—not only Calabasas, Agoura and [Simi Valley](#), but [Oak Park](#), [Bell Canyon](#), [Chatsworth](#) and [West Hills](#).

William Bowling, founder of the Aerospace Contamination Museum of Education, said the Obama administration has spent more than \$38 million studying contamination at the site, which is situated about 2,000 feet above sea level.

Every time it rains contaminants flow downstream, and a fear of water pollution is one of the factors that led to the halt of the massive Ahmanson Ranch development, Bowling said.

He said the Community Advisory Group, which advocates a smaller soil scrub, is a creation by Boeing in order to derail the cleanup effort and keep costs to a minimum.

The state's Department of Toxic Substances Control disagrees, and says the group is an "independent, community-led" organization.

[Westlake](#) resident Cindi Gortner, formerly of [Oak Park](#), said human health should be the focus of the cleanup.

"I want it cleaned for my health and my children's health. I'm a mom with three kids. . . . I've been doing this for five years because I see lots of people getting sick," said Gortner, who favors full decontamination of the site.

Some people worry that the cleanup proposed by the advisory group would allow 98 percent of all contaminants to remain.

The Calabasas Environmental Commission decided to postpone its recommendation about which cleanup method to pursue pending further study.

Those favoring a more thorough cleanup are scheduled to make a presentation to the Calabasas commission on Nov. 4.

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