



SSFL CAG White Paper Concerning NBC's 'LA'S NUCLEAR SECRET' January, 2016

Summary:

NBC News aired "LA's Nuclear Secret" in two parts on 9/21/15 and 9/22/15. Joel Grover and the NBC4 I-Team reported on the Santa Susana Field Laboratory (aka Rocketdyne). The report was both misleading and alarmist as it relates to SSFL's history and current status. The report's basic premise is flawed in that the nuclear "secret" was no secret at all and the site's nuclear contamination was not akin to either Three Mile Island or Chernobyl. As of now most of the nuclear contamination at SSFL has been cleaned up. This paper, prepared by the Santa Susana Field Laboratory Community Advisory Group (CAG), sets the record straight by addressing a number of basic erroneous allegations made in the NBC report.

The SSFL Community Advisory Group agrees that the SSFL contains contamination and recommends a cleanup to US EPA standards that are protective of the health of the surrounding communities and the environment. By no means does the level of contamination pose such a risk to the community to justify a destructive cleanup that in and of itself will pose severe dangers to the surrounding communities.

California EPA's Department of Toxic Substance Control has repeatedly stated there is no risk posed by SSFL to the surrounding communities, most recently on 10/15/15:

"In addition to ensuring that the 2,849-acre SSFL site is cleaned up to a fully protective level, DTSC is committed to ensuring that contaminants from SSFL do not pose a threat or impact to nearby properties. DTSC, The US EPA, The California Department of Public Health, the US Nuclear Regulatory Commission, the CDC and several other agencies have conducted extensive sampling, or reviewed and analyzed data, from the areas surrounding SSFL. There is contaminated soil on SSFL that will be required to be cleaned up. Based on the available data, there is no evidence of contamination from SSFL that poses an off-site threat to human health or the environment."*

Examples of misleading, alarmist reporting:

1. There was nothing secret about the SSFL or the fact that companies like Rocketdyne and Atomics International were doing major work for U.S. government agencies such as NASA or the Departments of Defense and Energy. These companies hired thousands of employees who lived in surrounding communities including the San Fernando Valley. Newspapers routinely reported on development of the rocket engines and nuclear reactors. Furthermore,

these companies constantly touted their successes in promotional publications distributed to the public. When a rocket engine test was performed in the 60's, 70's, and 80's most of the people in the San Fernando Valley heard it and knew what it was. Although the activities of the SSFL may be "news" to younger people, or to some who recently moved into the area, it was never a "secret."

2. The report as a whole lacks documented numbers and other hard evidence. Though it states "radiation was off the charts," no charts or figures are cited. The innuendo is that the surrounding community received radiation poisoning through the air over years, but no such thing happened. NBC largely relied on an interview with John Pace, then a 19 year old trainee at the experimental liquid sodium cooled reactor. The 1959 incident released no significant amount of nuclear products other than inert, non-reactive "noble gases" such as xenon and krypton, which are not incorporated into the body, were not harmful and quickly decayed and dissipated into the air. The suggestion that these gases harmed the community then or that they are still affecting us today, 56 years later, is false.

3. No actual records or data were presented to back up the report's allegation that the Sodium Reactor Experiment (SRE) was 260 times worse than Three Mile Island (TMI). That is categorically impossible. Neither of these incidents resulted in any proven off-site health effects. TMI was a large water-cooled commercial power reactor that was severely damaged and ultimately demolished and decontaminated. Because of high pressures associated with a water-cooled reactor, TMI had a steel-lined concrete pressure containment system. The SRE was a liquid metal-cooled **low pressure reactor** requiring a below-grade concrete vault rather than a containment dome. Because the SRE was a low pressure type of reactor, an explosion such as at Chernobyl was not possible. The Chernobyl meltdown was the worst nuclear disaster in history with some workers dying of radiation effects within a few months. Large quantities of radioactive material were released for 10 days and around 1 million people were potentially exposed to excessive radiation eventually causing hundreds of deaths. The SSFL reactor incident was nowhere nearly as consequential as Chernobyl and to suggest that it was is irresponsible reporting.

4. On 11/10/15, the American Jewish University (owners of Brandeis-Bardin) issued a press release stating NBC's reporting was inflammatory, irresponsible and misrepresentative. It further said that "the news broadcast created several false impressions by relying on innuendo, partial information, and speculation rather than evidence and facts". Brandeis-Bardin assures that its property is not contaminated today and poses no risk to its workers, students or visitors.*

*For more information see the SSFL CAG website, ssflcag.net, which contains comprehensive references and documentation of the history, current status and future of the SSFL. Also visit SSFL CAG on **Facebook**.