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Scientific evidence points to camp's safety

GUEST OPINION

By Jay Strear

Special to the Acorn

Brandeis-Bardin has been a part of the Simi Valley community for 70 years. In addition to our popular camp, we serve as a retreat and recreation site for schools and neighborhood groups, as well as a training ground for police and fire departments.

But today, our camp—and the community—are under assault.

The late Sen. Daniel Patrick Moynihan famously said: “Everyone is entitled to his own opinion, but not to his own facts.” The *Acorn* recently ran an article suggesting a legitimate controversy exists over the safety of our camp due to its proximity to the Santa Susana Field Lab. In fact, this controversy rests on a fiction fabricated by activists masquerading as experts.

The *Acorn* article states: “Denise Duffield, an activist and member of the SSFL work group, said the (Department of Toxic Substances Control) left out key independent studies— like one conducted in 2006 by UCLA’s Yoram Cohen and University of Michigan’s Hal Morgenstern—that indicate contamination has migrated off-site.

“By excluding recent reports that show contamination at Brandeis and misrepresenting existing data, DTSC has made it appear that Brandeis- Bardin—located directly below one of the most contaminated sites in California—has not been impacted by SSFL. And that is false,’ Duffield told the *Acorn*.”

Ms. Duffield referenced only two of nearly a dozen epidemiological studies of the SSFL’s impacts on the surrounding community. Only one of these, the Cohen study, concluded SSFL poses an off-site risk. Apart from being an outlier, that study was never completed (it exists only in draft form), and its author never answered critiques from fellow scientists.

As credentialed environmental scientists pointed out, Cohen’s incomplete study contained several overlapping errors that “result not in a worst-case scenario but one that is highly improbable, if not impossible, and pertains to no single individual or group of individuals.” Cohen also failed to explain why he reached the opposite conclusion from a 1999 study by the federal Agency for Toxic Substances and Disease Registry, given that both studies used the same data.

The truth is that the draft Cohen study is not an objective work of science. Some activists have lately made a habit of misrepresenting environmental data to influence the cleanup plan of the field lab. It is no surprise that the draft Cohen study is an outlier or that direct environmental sampling data from our camp proves him wrong.

Ms. Duffield similarly misrepresented the 2007 Morgenstern Report. The report itself states there is “no direct evidence from this investigation . . . that these observed associations reflect the effects of environmental exposures originating at SSFL.” It goes on to say “there are several alternative explanations for our findings, including chance and bias.” Finally, DTSC did not selectively exclude either of these studies from its recent report, as Ms. Duffield suggests. In fact, DTSC did not cite any epidemiological studies, because DTSC’s report is not an epidemiological study. Rather, it analyzes direct evidence of environmental conditions from our camp based on decades of testing. Those data sets lead to only one conclusion—that Brandeis is safe.

For decades, Ms. Duffield’s Physicians for Social Responsibility as well as the Committee to Bridge the Gap and several other activist groups have invested deeply in what they have termed a “full cleanup” of the SSFL. The cleanup they want would necessitate the removal of an enormous amount of soil from the SSFL—soil they believe should be transported directly through our camp. Only by spreading falsehoods about our camp can they hope to convince the public that this is a good idea.

If they are successful, the activists may seriously harm not just us, but the local Simi Valley community as well. Their “full cleanup” will require at least 10 years of truck traffic to and from the SSFL as soil is removed and backfilled. That work will not only create traffic, dust and noise, it could also destroy native habitats and irreplaceable cultural and historical resources.

We do not ask the public to take our word for any of this. All relevant data and reports that we know of have been posted to our website, www.aju.edu. We invite readers to consider for themselves the vast and substantiated scientific evidence of our camp’s safety.

Strear is senior vice president of the American Jewish University, which owns the Brandeis-Bardin Institute.

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