

# 60 Years Since the Largest U.S. Nuclear Accident and Captured Federal Agencies

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*60 years ago today the largest nuclear accident in U.S. history occurred above the Southern California community of Simi Valley when the Santa Susanna Field Laboratory (SSFL) site suffered a partial nuclear meltdown. That accident, kept secret for two decades, has resulted in ongoing local health effects that persist to this day and has pitted the community health and wellbeing against corporate financial interests and captured government agencies.*

SSFL, a 2850 acre site, currently owned by the Department of Energy, NASA and the largest owner being Boeing, is a former nuclear reactor and rocket engine testing site. It is located in the hills above the Simi and San Fernando Valleys, at the headwaters of the Los Angeles River. Located about 25 miles from downtown Los Angeles, originally far from population areas, the area now has around 500,000 people within 10 miles of the site. Over its years of operation, there were 10 non-contained nuclear reactors that operated on the site as well as plutonium and uranium fuel fabrication facilities and a “hot lab” where highly irradiated fuel from around the U.S. nuclear complex was shipped for decladding and examination. In addition there were tens of thousands of rocket engine tests conducted over the many years of operation.

The Sodium Reactor Experiment or SRE was the first reactor to provide commercial nuclear power to a U.S. city in Moorpark. Then on July 13, 1959, a partial meltdown occurred in which a third of the fuel experienced melting. **Dr. Arjun Makhijani** estimated the incident released 260 times the amount of radioactive iodine as was released from the 1979 Three Mile Island accident.

As a result of this partial meltdown and numerous other reactor accidents, radioactive fires, massive chemical contamination in handling of the radioactive and chemically contaminated toxic materials that were routinely burned in open pits through the years at the site, it remains one of the most highly contaminated sites in the country. It has widespread contamination with radionuclides such as cesium-137, strontium-90, plutonium-239 and toxic chemicals perchlorate, trichloroethylene (TCE), heavy metals and dioxins.

In 2012, the U.S. EPA released the results of an extensive radiological survey of Area IV and the Northern Buffer Zone at SSFL, and found 500 samples with radioactivity above background levels, in some cases, thousands of times over background.

These toxins are associated with a multitude of health risks. Many are cancer causing, others are neurotoxins causing a host of issues including learning disabilities, birth defects and many other health effects. The most vulnerable tend to be women and

children. Through the years, there have been many health studies performed. In 2006, a cluster of retinoblastoma cases, a rare eye cancer affecting young children, was identified within an area downwind of the site. The retinoblastoma mothers meeting at Los Angeles's Children's Hospital ultimately formed a chemo carpool.

The Public Health Institute's 2012 California Breast Cancer Mapping Project found that the rate of breast cancer is higher in Thousand Oaks, Simi Valley, Oak Park and Moorpark than in almost any other place in the state.

In addition, studies by cancer registries found elevated rates of bladder cancer associated with proximity to SSFL.

There have been numerous additional studies including one by the UCLA School of Public Health that found significantly elevated cancer death rates among both the nuclear and rocket workers at SSFL from exposures to these toxic materials. Another study by UCLA found offsite exposures to hazardous chemicals by the neighboring population at levels exceeding EPA levels of concern.

A study performed for the Federal Agency for Toxic Substances and Disease Registry found the incidence of key cancers, those types known to be associated with the contaminants on site, were 60% higher in the offsite population within 5 miles of the site compared to further away.

Unfortunately, these contaminants do not stay on site. When it rains, they wash off site to the Valleys below. When it blows, they become airborne and migrate offsite. The 2017 Woolsey fire is a most recent example. After initially denials, officials finally admitted the fire actually started on the field lab site burning across almost the entire site and potentially spreading toxic chemicals over the basin. Unfortunately, no adequate monitoring was performed and only began days after the flames had moved on.

Ultimately, the California Department of Toxic Substances Control (DTSC), has regulatory oversight of the cleanup and of the responsible parties which include NASA, the Department of Energy (DOE), and Boeing. In 2010, the Department of Energy and NASA signed historic agreements with DTSC that committed them to cleaning up all detectable contamination. The agreements, or Administrative Orders on Consent (AOC), specified that the cleanup was to be completed by 2017. Boeing, which owns most of the SSFL property, refused to sign the cleanup agreements. Nevertheless, DTSC said that its normal procedures require it to defer to local governments' land use plans and zoning, which for SSFL allow agricultural and rural residential uses. DTSC said SSFL's zoning would thus require Boeing to conduct a cleanup equivalent to the NASA/DOE requirements.

In response, Boeing, currently under scrutiny after the 737 MAX crashes, launched a massive "greenwashing" campaign in an attempt to convince the public that SSFL's contamination was minimal, never hurt anyone, and that the site doesn't need much of a cleanup because it is going to be an open space park. Boeing prefers a re-designation to recreational cleanup standards that are based on someone being on the site infrequently limited to a few hours per week. But people who live near SSFL don't live in recreational areas, they live in residential areas and as long as the site isn't fully cleaned up, they will still be at risk of exposure to SSFL contamination.

Recently, both the Dept. of Energy and NASA, following Boeing's lead, have said that they

too want to break out of their legal cleanup agreements and also cleanup to a weak recreational standard. So, all three responsible parties are completely disregarding the state of California's regulatory authority. In effect they are asserting that they, the polluters, get to decide how much of their contamination gets cleaned up. That violates federal Resource Conservation and Recovery Act laws as well as the AOC cleanup agreements. Now more than ever, we need our elected representatives to stand up and demand the existing cleanup agreements be upheld.

Melissa Bumstead, an adjacent West Hills resident whose daughter has twice survived a rare leukemia and who has mapped over 50 other rare pediatric cancers near SSFL, is bringing fresh energy and new voices into the cleanup fight. Her [Change.org petition](#) has now been signed by over 650,000 people and is helping to galvanize the community to fight for the full, promised cleanup.

Thus far, almost all local and federal elected officials have voiced concern that the cleanup agreements are being broken, especially in the wake of the Woolsey Fire. What is needed now is action. People ask how to protect themselves. The best thing people can do is fight for the full cleanup of SSFL. Each of has an opportunity to help this effort. We must contact all of our local officials and demand action today for a full cleanup of SSFL.

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Featured image: The Sodium Reactor Experiment (SRE) nuclear facility at the the Santa Susanna Field Laboratory (SSFL) site in 1958. (Image: DOE, cc)

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