

Special Report

Rocketdyne Ranch

The battle over the massive Ahmanson Ranch housing development heats up amid growing concerns about possible water and soil contamination from nearby Rocketdyne

by Michael Collins

July 1959. Eastern Ventura County. Simi Valley folks squirmed uncomfortably in their chairs as they watched their flickering black and white television sets. They stared in nervous awe as Soviet Premier Nikita Krushchev and Vice President Richard Nixon toured a Moscow exposition of a model American home. When the pair paused in the kitchen, they erupted into a bellicose argument. “We have means at our disposal which can have very bad consequences,” Krushchev hollered through an interpreter. “We have too,” Nixon countered. “Ours are better,” Krushchev shot back.

The image of the two leaders threatening each other in the comfy setting of American-made appliances—the legendary Kitchen Debate —brought home the deadly seriousness of the Cold War. No one knew at the time that events unfolding on a picturesque hilltop just five miles from town were bringing the grim reality of that era even closer. On a 2,668-acre complex covered with boulders and blanketed by chaparral lay Rocketdyne’s Santa Susana Field Laboratory (SSFL), a giant semisecret expanse of rocket test stands, concrete bunkers and nuclear reactors. The laboratory was intricate in developing America’s arsenal of intercontinental ballistic missiles including the nuke-tipped Minuteman rocket. The work going on at the laboratory was one of the reasons that Nixon could confidently stare down the Soviet premier.

What nearly no one knew in Simi that hot summer night was this: a primitive Rocketdyne nuclear reactor, the Sodium Reactor Experiment, was in the throes of a meltdown. Nearly a third of the reactor’s core melted and slopped onto the floor of the core and radioactivity spewed into the environment from the unconfined building. The disaster, which wasn’t acknowledged until five weeks later, would forebode the continuing problems that Rocketdyne would have in handling radioactive and toxic materials for decades to come. That same year a fuel rod exploded at the lab while being washed with water, flooding a reactor with radioactivity that was vented outside. In 1960, a reactor pipe that was being moved outdoors for decontamination exploded and flew across



Decontaminated concrete foundations from Rocketdyne's nuclear facility. Photo by Catherine Ledner

The Reporter

News & Opinion

Entertainment

Classified

Personals

Special Issues

Extras

a ravine. The facility would also experience another catastrophe in 1964 when an experimental space reactor melted down with eighty percent of the nuclear fuel melting and radiation escaping into the environment.

Now, fifty-four years after Santa Susana opened in 1948, America's third largest bank, Washington Mutual, is attempting to complete plans to build 3,050 luxury homes, two golf courses, and 400,000 square feet of commercial space on 2,783 acres within three miles of SSFL. Critics have long assailed the proposed Ahmanson Ranch project since it would develop the largest remaining privately owned land between Ventura County and the San Fernando Valley. They decry what they claim would be a traffic congestion nightmare and have voiced concerns over the endangered California red-legged frog and the San Fernando Valley spineflower found at the site. But recent revelations regarding chemical and radiological pollution at the site possibly emanating from Rocketdyne's adjacent lab have come to the forefront in the battle over Ahmanson Ranch.

December, 2002. Eastern Ventura County. Puffs of dust are created by Jonathan Parfrey's footsteps as he walks a trail through Ahmanson Ranch. The Los Angeles director of the public health organization Physicians for Social Responsibility pauses on a bluff overlooking an expanse of ancient oaks. "Four thousand trees may be replaced by luxury homes, golf courses and about 10,000 people if Washington Mutual has its way," he said. "The folks planning to bulldoze this land have ignored the possibility that this project could poison thousands of people in adjacent communities. Now push has come to shove."

For the last half a year, local activists have pressured the county to test the groundwater under Ahmanson Ranch. "They must analyze the groundwater for SSFL pollution since they plan to use 660,000 gallons of it everyday to water playgrounds, golf courses, common areas and lawns," said Mary Weisbrock of the Agoura Hills-based activist group Save Open Space. "Just less than two miles from SSFL, Washington Mutual's Ahmanson Land Company (ALC) plans to extract ground water for irrigation. Yet Rocketdyne data reveals that it's closest extraction well to the development project is over 480 times the toxic level of the government's standard for trichloroethylene."

Trichloroethylene, or TCE, is a carcinogenic solvent used to clean rocket engine hardware. During the '50s and '60s, approximately 1.73 million gallons of the solvent were sluiced into unlined ponds and about a third of it has made its way into the groundwater under the laboratory. Rocketdyne vigorously denies that any hazardous levels of the goo has migrated offsite. "The farthest we found is about 800 feet off our property," said Steve Lafflam, Rocketdyne's division director for safety, health and environmental affairs.

"Given the extent and complexity of the pollution problems at Rocketdyne, no one can say for sure what has happened with all the contaminants that have leaked into the soil and groundwater," said Dr. Joseph Lyou, former SSFL Workgroup member and current Director of the California League of Conservation Voters Education Fund. "When it comes to Ahmanson Ranch, better safe than sorry would be the best approach. Only fools or dimwits would go forward with building this project without a better understanding of what's going on. Lives may be at stake. Let's not forget that."

The Ahmanson Ranch endgame saga began June 19 when Dennis Hawkins, senior planner for Ventura County, told a planning board meeting that he would instruct sub-contractors to check for pollutants in the groundwater under Ahmanson Ranch possibly emanating from SSFL. That heavily polluted site is now undergoing a \$258 million dollar cleanup due to radioactive and chemical pollution resultant of half a century of rocket tests and chemical and radiological mishaps, releases and spills.

The test results were shocking. The rocket fuel oxidizer, perchlorate, was found to be 14 times over what California currently considers safe for drinking water. One well tested positive for perchlorate at a level of 28 parts per billion (ppb).

On Dec. 6, California's Office of Environmental Health Hazard Assessment lowered the public health safety goal for perchlorate from 4ppb to 2ppb in response to growing alarm over the oxidizer's toxicity. "Perchlorate disrupts how the thyroid functions," according to the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA). "Impairment of thyroid function in expectant mothers may impact the fetus and newborn and result in effects including changes in behavior, delayed development and decreased learning capability. Changes in thyroid hormone levels may also result in thyroid gland tumors." No studies have been undertaken to determine the hazards of breathing in airborne perchlorate or its effects due to skin exposure through contaminated water droplets.

Last week, it was revealed that perchlorate has been found in 18 wells in Simi Valley. The highest reading was 19.2ppb, nearly ten times the new allowable limit of the powdery white substance in California drinking water. Perchlorate has been found in a former sodium burn pit at SSFL and was disposed of in the eastern part of the laboratory where munitions and propellant testing took place. Readings as high as 600ppb have been found in that eastern area of the lab. Rocketdyne has said that there is no evidence that perchlorate has migrated offsite towards Simi or Ahmanson Ranch and has suggested that children playing with fireworks may be the cause of the pollution.

Few are convinced that the source of the perchlorate in the Simi Valley wells was a result of kids chucking fireworks into the water. Parfrey, who is a member of the Environmental Protection Agency's Santa Susana Field Laboratory Workgroup, which is overseeing efforts to clean up SSFL, is one of the folks not buying Rocketdyne's rap. "It's patently ridiculous to assume that the source of the perchlorate in Simi's wells and under Ahmanson could come from fireworks. But this is typical of Rocketdyne to deny that pollution on their property somehow magically stops at the perimeter fence of the lab. This is the kind of hooey we've heard from the company for years."

Indeed, an ALC subcontractor testing the Ahmanson Ranch site contended that the aquifers under Rocketdyne and the ranch land are separate. Diamond Bar-based Kleinfelder Inc.'s 2000 report discounts any chance of groundwater migration from Rocketdyne to the ranch's water table: "The SSFL and the Ahmanson Ranch Project are characterized by different watersheds and separate aquifers." An April 2002 report, created by an ALC subcontractor, Ontario-based CDM, goes on to claim that "(T)he primary purpose of the sampling was to determine if there was any significant contamination under the site from activities at the (SSFL) site to the north. No evidence of contamination was detected."

Anti-Ahmanson Ranch development activists point out that SSFL is located above the so-called Chatsworth formation which is a fractured bedrock geologic configuration which could allow for toxic migration. James Slosson, chief engineering geologist for Van Nuys-based Slosson and Associates, agrees. "It is my professional opinion that a portion of the subsurface water exiting the Rocketdyne facility migrates southerly in the direction of the proposed (development's groundwater extraction) wells. As a consequence, the extracted water may contain toxic contaminants from the Rocketdyne operation which will present a health hazard," Slosson wrote in an April 30 missive to the county of Ventura's Resource Management Agency. "The surface runoff from the golf courses could also be contaminated. Much of this runoff would eventually reach Las Virgenes Creek and Malibu Lagoon."

Incoming Ventura County Supervisor and Ahmanson opponent Linda Parks concurs. "I don't think there is a question as to where the perchlorate contamination is coming from," Parks told the Reporter. "Rocketdyne used rocket fuel, perchlorate is an ingredient of rocket fuel and Rocketdyne's Santa Susana site, which is upstream of both Ahmanson Ranch and Simi Valley, is contaminated with perchlorate. While Rocketdyne states there is no evidence, I believe there is an abundance of evidence and it is essential that it be properly recognized for what it is and cleaned up as soon as possible."

Also found in the recent ground water was antimony, a silvery-white metal that exceeds the

government's "maximum contaminant level" by 766 percent. Antimony in the air attaches to very small particles that may stay in the air for days, according to the Agency for Toxic Substances and Disease Registry. "Breathing high levels for a long time can irritate your eyes and lungs and cause heart and lung problems, stomach pain, diarrhea, vomiting, and stomach problems," an agency document states.

Regardless of these findings, Ventura's planning board approved the Preliminary Final Supplemental Environmental Impact Report (SEIR) Nov. 22, setting the stage for the Dec. 10 vote. (See related story on page 16.) This, despite the fact that the SEIR admitted that Kleinfelder may have not done a thorough job testing the groundwater and soil. "The sampling program conducted by Kleinfelder does not appear to be performed as a comprehensive toxics evaluation of the area," the SEIR stated. "As it was conducted, it can be considered cursory screening of the site for contaminants."

"Not only was Kleinfelder's work 'cursory,' it was most likely rigged," said Parfrey. "Their methods for testing for radionuclides were probably phony." Parfrey pointed to the SEIR's admission that it used Rocketdyne's methods for testing suspect groundwater. A 1989 report by Rocketdyne subcontractor Groundwater Resources Consultants Inc. (GRC) noted how high concentrations of radionuclides in water can be lowered. "It is likely that high gross alpha and beta (radiation) activity is correlated with high sediment content in samples," the report stated. "Following collection of samples in June, Rocketdyne contacted Dr. George Uyesugi of the California Department of Health Services Radiation Laboratory in Berkeley for direction in handling samples collected from groundwater monitor wells with high sediment content. Dr. Uyesugi suggested that upon receipt at the laboratory, samples containing large amounts of sediment should be allowed to settle, then decanted. Analyses would then be performed on the decanted material. The technique of decanting high sediment samples was implemented in July, however, [it] was replaced by filtering in the current sampling program in order to generate more consistent, comparable water quality data."

"All samples collected during July were decanted prior to analyses," the report continued. "Some samples were also filtered." Bewildering as this data may seem, the information clearly seems to suggest that tests of the Rocketdyne groundwater may have been machinated in order to hide the possibility that SSFL's groundwater may be seriously contaminated by radioactive substances.

Parfrey becomes visibly agitated when discussing the decanting of groundwater at Rocketdyne prior to radioactive analysis. "If Washington Mutual's subcontractors followed the same procedures that Rocketdyne did, as the SEIR plainly states, then we can deduce that the results are meaningless. And when you are dealing with radionuclides that could be a deadly mistake. But it's hard to tell since it's been so damn hard trying to get information from the SEIR about this."

Obtaining the SEIR's information has been hard to get in general. When the 4,000 page report, weighing 56 pounds, came out in September, it was available in hard copy for \$1,000. Public agencies, organizations and individuals who submitted substantive comments on the Public Draft Supplemental EIR were sent free CD-Roms of the SEIR but the discs were defective and missing vast chunks of information. Senior planner Hawkins then sent out a letter informing the recipients that they could call him or e-mail him for a new disc. However, the e-mail address in the letter was faulty. Then the second batch of CD-ROM's finally were sent and they were faulty as well. Over a month ago, this reporter called Hawkins and requested a disk. Hawkins said that he hadn't any more but if I sent him twelve dollars he would send me one. I sent him the twelve dollars on Nov. 7. I still haven't received the CD-ROM and have had to rely on numerous sources to get the parts of the truncated SEIR to report on this story.

A Petition for a Writ of Mandate and Complaint for Damage was filed in late November by the City of Calabasas and by Westlake-based attorney Ed Masry, representing five individuals, against the County of Ventura over these lack-of-information shenanigans. The suit charged that the county had violated California's Brown Act that holds, in part, that all evidence must be

available at public meetings for them to be legal and requested that the court postpone the Dec. 10 County Board of Supervisors meeting when the supervisors were set to begin deliberations on the SEIR. City of Calabasas Special Council Katherine Stone pointed out that Ventura's planning commission accompanied Washington Mutual officials to the Ahmanson Ranch site, without accompanying folks from the public, and were presented a pleasant presentation of how beneficial the ranch development scheme would be by the developers. On Dec. 6, Judge Harry Walsh threw out the suit saying that the supervisors could remedy the situation themselves. "How they are going to do that is beyond me," Stone told the Reporter. "Judge Walsh's decision is perplexing."

Despite problems getting a complete SEIR in a timely fashion, the Reporter was able to unearth some disquieting data. An estimated 43 million cubic yards of soil, the equivalent of 55 Rose Bowls of dirt, would be excavated over the eight years needed to complete the project, according to Kleinfelder. This will release 23,328 tons of dust into the air. Kleinfelder's sampling of the soil used Rocketdyne's polluted dirt as 'control' specimens to compare against and still found that Ahmanson Ranch earth was hotter than Rocketdyne's. Some Ahmanson soil samples contain double the amount of Radium 226, Thorium 230, Uranium 235 and nearly double the amount of Uranium 233, Uranium 234 and Uranium 238. "Under EPA guidelines, Ahmanson soil is from several times to hundreds of times hotter than what is acceptable," said Parfrey. "Radioactive Potassium 40 was 415 to 1,150 times over what is allowable and could result in a cancer risk of one in 869. The project would make airborne thousands of tons of radioactive dust, which could gravely impact the surrounding area."

Community activist, Elizabeth Crawford, uncovered much of the nasty details regarding Ahmanson Ranch's dirt and groundwater. The 43-year-old mother of three finds the whole process leading up to the final vote next week perplexing and perverse. "When I first got involved in this issue, I felt that the responsible powers that be would be responsive to the data," she said. "Only some were but, thankfully, they are from the EPA, the Department of Toxic Substances Control and the city of Los Angeles. If Ventura's supervisors OK this project, they can expect a landslide of lawsuits that will make Washington Mutual wish they had never heard of Ahmanson Ranch."

Crawford has worked closely with Rally to Save Ahmanson Ranch, the group headed by HBO CEO Chris Albrecht, actor Martin Sheen and actor, director and children's advocate, Rob Reiner. "I am appalled that Washington Mutual will not do the appropriate testing to determine the extent of the contamination on Ahmanson Ranch," Reiner told the Reporter. "Moving forward on the Ahmanson Ranch project without further testing is irresponsible and puts the public's health and safety at risk. Ventura County and Washington Mutual have an obligation to determine the extent of the contamination on Ahmanson and to determine its source. We are talking about the health of children and families. This issue cannot be dismissed so easily when the public's health and safety is at risk. Ventura County must take the time now to get all the information before moving forward."

Pausing under an ancient oak on Ahmanson Ranch, Parfrey voices strong agreement with Reiner. "This faulty SEIR doesn't adequately address the health risks that this project could cause," Parfrey said. "California Attorney General Bill Lockyer has already threatened to sue Ventura over the possible pollution problems. The city and county of Los Angeles are planning to litigate if the Ventura Board of Supervisors OKs the project. Governor Davis has expressed his opposition to the plan and his administration's desire to buy the land to preserve as open space. And that's just what should happen. Ahmanson Ranch should become a park for this and future generations to enjoy. It would be perfectly safe as a park."

Ahmanson Ranch seems to be a metaphor for the challenges facing Southern California. We need new space for housing, as this reporter was told by the former Mayor of Los Angeles, Richard Riordan. We need new space for folks trying to make a living servicing those people who could actually afford those prospective manses in the pristine hills that are Ahmanson Ranch. But at what cost? Shall it be polluting the environment because a big bank needs to make its nickel back

or should it be in the interest of the people of Ventura County and the San Fernando Valley? The decision that the Ventura County Board of Supervisors makes this month will last long after all of us are forgotten.

Michael Collins is an award-winning investigative journalist specializing in environmental issues. He has reported extensively on Rocketdyne for Los Angeles magazine and the L.A. Weekly newspaper since 1998. Collins was recently elected to become a Director of the Greater Los Angeles Press Club for a two-year term beginning in January.

BATTLEGROUND AHMANSON RANCH

On day one, pro and anti-development forces face off in Ventura

Over two hundred people crowded the Ventura County Board of Supervisors Hearing Room and two overflow quarters in the Hall of Administration on Dec.10 as the long and arduous battle over Ahmanson Ranch commenced its final legislative struggle. The room was filled with folks sporting “Build It! YES. Ahmanson Ranch” Day-Glo green badges or, alternatively, red “Stop Washington Mutual” stickers.

“There won’t be any personal attacks on anyone, especially the chair,” quipped Supervisor and board chair John Flynn, as the unusually congenial four hour meeting began. “We want to hear the facts,” he said. “We will have full disclosure.”

The meeting began with a presentation by Ventura County’s senior planner, Dennis Hawkins, who signed off on the Preliminary Final Supplemental Environmental Impact Report (SEIR), which if approved, could give the green light to the massive development in eastern Ventura County. Hawkins claimed that the SEIR would protect the California red-legged frog and San Fernando Valley spineflower plant. He discounted claims that a new traffic study was needed since the 1992 analysis of potential gridlock that could result from the development was already adequate. Hawkins went on to assert that perchlorate contamination in well number one, targeted for use in irrigating Ahmanson Ranch, would not impact humans or the frog—but if it were deemed nasty enough, it would be cleaned. However, he didn’t specify the exact mechanism to accomplish that goal.

Next up to the podium was a team of Washington Mutual officials touting the development. Utilizing a sophisticated slideshow presentation, the WaMu crew proclaimed their good intentions, pointing out that they had promised to donate 10,000 acres of open space to the county, would create a 330-acre preserve for the threatened flower, wouldn’t harm the frog’s habitat and would use ‘reclaimed’ water for their golf courses. “We made a promise to ourselves to see this project through,” said one official. “The Ranch is award-winning on a local and national level.”

Not all were convinced. “It’s a great project but it’s in the wrong place and the impacts have not been mitigated,” Fran Pavley (D–Woodland Hills) told the Reporter. “There are water quality issues. We’re a lot smarter in understanding watersheds and impacts. I’m concerned that the EIR has not adequately addressed water quality not only downstream in Malibu Creek and the Surfrider Beach but water availability, as well, is a new issue that has come up regarding the contamination of perchlorate. I’m going to ask them to err on the side of cautiousness to make sure they have all the information in front of them, and to order new studies. Time should not be their enemy.”

Los Angeles City Councilmember Dennis Zine, who represents 280,000 people in the West San Fernando Valley, publicly decried the potential traffic congestion impact that the Ahmanson Ranch would create. He noted to the Supervisors that while the 101 freeway in Ventura County

has a center median that could be expanded to create additional lanes but that no such median exists in the San Fernando Valley part of the freeway.

Assemblymember Hannah-Beth Jackson (D-Santa Barbara) also expressed worries over traffic gridlock but seemed more concerned with possible pollution problems resultant from the Ahmanson Ranch plan. "That's probably the main reason I'm here today," she told the Reporter. "I'm very concerned about this really critical issue, perchlorate, which is a known carcinogen. It has tremendously negative impacts on adults and particularly on fetuses who are exposed to perchlorate. It's a very dangerous toxic substance. The fact that it has been found and yet no full or complete discussion of what mitigation measures will be taken, what the source is or the extent of it, really concerns me. I think public health is a primary consideration and is not the consideration here in this project. And it must be done. We need to review it. We need the answers before going forward. It's a matter of public health and safety."

After the meeting, the Reporter spoke with Supervisor Flynn about the upcoming hearings on Ahmanson Ranch, to be held Dec. 17 and 18. When asked if the public would have a chance for additional comments at the meetings, Flynn replied "Yes they will if they submit a request for comment on our blue cards before 2:30 p.m. each day. Put that in your paper." So we have. If you want to have a say in the battle over Ahmanson Ranch, you can attend the hearings Dec. 17 from 1:30 p.m. to 5:30 p.m. and on Dec. 18 from 8:30 a.m. to 5:30 p.m. Hearings will take place in the Ventura County Board of Supervisors Hearing Room in the Hall of Administration at 800 N. Victoria Avenue in Ventura. For more information, call the County Clerk of the Board at 805-654-3361.

—*Michael Collins*

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