



BRIDGING THE GAP BETWEEN
NUCLEAR DANGERS & A SAFE,
SUSTAINABLE FUTURE

December 2010

Board of Directors

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Another Letter to Help the Year End

*In gratitude for having been sustained, preserved, protected, and
permitted to see this day.*

Dear Friend,

Thirty-one years ago, Bridge the Gap brought to public attention a partial nuclear meltdown that had occurred in 1959 at the Santa Susana Field Laboratory (SSFL) and covered up for two decades thereafter. And then we made a fateful mistake: we promised the nearby community we would help them get the site shut down, independent health studies conducted, and the contamination cleaned up.

Among our many failings are a difficulty breaking our word, when most others would have moved on, and a difficulty keeping our word in anywhere near the amount of time we originally anticipated.

And so, three decades later, a great victory has finally emerged: the site has been shut down, independent health studies have been performed, and now, agreements executed to clean up all the contamination that can be detected at the Department of Energy (DOE) nuclear site and the NASA rocket site.

SSFL sits on a plateau atop the Simi Hills. Below reside hundreds of thousands of people in Simi Valley, Chatsworth, Oak Park, Thousand Oaks, and numerous other communities. Above them, government agencies and their contractors repeatedly cut safety corners, violated environmental laws, and spilled and released radioactive and toxic materials with callous disdain for the people who lived below. The polluters were literally above it all. They acted with impunity, as though the people nearby simply did not matter.

Immediately beneath the site is a lovely little community called the Susana Knolls. Composed of rustic, hand-made homes, it houses people who wanted a simpler, cleaner, less polluted place in which to bring up their children. Little did they know what was going on, just up the hill.

They live on roads with names like Clear Springs Road, because streams coming off the mountain run through their yards and property. Their children grew up playing in those streams, and breathing the air that blew off the hills above them.

In 1989, they read in the newspapers about a leaked DOE study finding widespread radioactive and chemical contamination at SSFL. That was the first time most of them had known that there was a

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toxic operation being conducted nearby. Rocketdyne came to their homeowners' association and told them that the only dangerous thing up at the site was poison oak. The agencies similarly treated them with disdain, and began a long train of broken promises.

But the residents didn't just sit back and take it; they organized. They fought the relicensing of the nuclear hot lab, and won. They pressed for independent health studies, and got them. They attended hundreds and hundreds of meetings, which seemed at times intentionally boring so as to get them to despair and give up. But they never gave up. They just kept on fighting. "We aren't going away," was their refrain. They were in it for the long haul. And they won.

Throughout this long fight, I have personalized the battle in my mind by thinking always of four of them—Marie Mason, Dawn Kowalski, Barbara Johnson, and Holly Huff. Friends, they live right beneath the site. Well when they began the fight, all now have had cancer or other significant health problems.

And I think of that stream running down the mountain, and right through Holly's property. On top of the mountain are extensive amounts of contaminated soil, groundwater and surface water. Below the mountain are Marie, Dawn, Barbara, and Holly.

We are all connected to one another. You dump carcinogens on top of a mountain and when the rains come and the winds blow, those carcinogens can move. And carcinogens, by definition, can cause cancer. In the innocent, the unsuspecting, the decent, the blameless. Whether it is this particular stream that carries the poisons, or something else like the wind, doesn't matter in the scheme of things. "When you spit on the Earth, you spit on your Mother."

We are all connected, one to the other. A stream connects us. What we carelessly dump in one place can be carried elsewhere, harming those who had nothing to do with our carelessness. We all live downstream from someone else, and someone lives downstream from us. We are all connected.

But the connection works in both directions, and the stream of justice can flow uphill. Marie, Dawn, Barbara, Holly and so many others worked diligently to stop and then repair the damage. Their actions, without ego or desire for attention, but just pure persistent struggle for right, touched the consciences and hearts of people in power, who bravely risked a good deal to help.

Linda Adams, the Secretary of Cal-EPA, courageously stuck her neck out to help them, over and over again, never giving up; extraordinary for a Cabinet Secretary to feel in her bones the plight of real human beings and to take it on herself to make things right. DTSC Deputy Director Rick Brausch worked sixty hour weeks for months to bring about agreement, in an often thankless situation. Deputy Cal-EPA Secretary Patty Zwarts artfully navigated the deal through to success. Senator Barbara Boxer, who had met with the Rocketdyne Cleanup Coalition in one of its members' homes some years ago and promised to work for cleanup, was energetically true to her word. Former State Senator Sheila Kuehl pushed year after year for legislation for the cleanup, before finally succeeding with the unbelievable commitment of time and energy of Assemblymember Julia Brownley. Congressman Elton Gallegly, Ventura County Supervisor Linda Parks and Los Angeles City Councilman Greig Smith were constant in their commitment and help. A bond—a stream if you will—connected those at the pinnacles of power with those below for whom they are supposed to work and whose lives are affected by the actions of the powerful. Together, we won. And together, we can beat any injustice. So long as we recognize the stream that connects us all.

May we be as a stream of Life,

Dan Hirsch