



Senator Sheila Kuehl

23rd District
Newsletter
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The Past and Present History of the Rocketdyne Test Site

The first of four articles
By Laura Plotkin

In the late 1940s, the federal government was looking for a remote site in Southern California in order to conduct nuclear reactor and rocket testing work that was considered too dangerous to perform in populated areas. This was the genesis of the Santa Susana Field Laboratory (SSFL), located at the Los Angeles-Ventura County boundary high up in the hills overlooking Chatworth and the Simi Valley. Over the next 60 years, the nearby population mushroomed, and, today, hundreds of thousands of people live nearby.

Over the years, ten nuclear reactors were constructed and operated at SSFL. A third of them suffered serious accidents. One of the accidents was particularly serious. In 1959, the coolant in the Sodium Reactor Experiment became blocked, causing the fuel to overheat. Despite high radiation readings and clear evidence that something was wrong, evidence now shows that operators kept the reactor running for weeks. When it was finally shut down, they discovered

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that a full one third of the fuel had experienced melting. The reactor had no containment structure (the thick concrete domes required of modern reactors to keep radioactivity from escaping) and, therefore, radioactivity was released directly into the environment. Nuclear scientists have estimated that the amount of radioactivity emitted from that accident alone could have been as much as 240 times that released from the Three Mile Island accident.

In 1964, a second reactor broke down, and, as a result, 80% of the fuel was damaged. Again, inexplicably, the operators kept the reactor running for a full year after

the breakdown even in the face of continuous readings indicating something was seriously wrong. In 1969, a third reactor suffered a similar accident, damaging a third of its fuel.

In addition, for several decades, reactor components were burned in open-air pits. Even though no radioactive or chemical wastes were ever allowed to be burned, the prohibition was repeatedly violated and the burn pit became significantly contaminated. On the rocket testing side of the property, approximately 30,000 rocket tests were conducted. Many of these used extremely toxic materials. TCE, for instance, a very toxic solvent, was used in massive quantities to wash off the rocket test stands, with the runoff percolating into the soil and groundwater. Half a million gallons of TCE are now in the soil and groundwater; by comparison, the permissible concentration of this solvent in drinking water is no more than five parts per billion.

In 1989, a federal Department of Energy study found widespread radioactive and chemical contamination throughout the site. The public disclosure of this study triggered involvement by the three Assemblymembers representing the area at the time – Terry Friedman, Richard Katz, and Cathie Wright. They pressed for effective cleanup of the site and epidemiological studies to determine if past exposures had harmed either workers or the public. In 1994, when Senator Kuehl was elected to the Assembly, succeeding Terry Friedman, she continued this work, and asked me to staff the is-

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Kuehl Names Ivy Bottini 2006 Woman of the Year

By Robin Podolsky

On March 20, 2006, at the State Capitol Building in Sacramento, State Senator Sheila Kuehl will present lifelong community activist Ivy Bottini to the State Legislature as the 23rd State Senate Districts' Woman of the Year.

State legislators throughout California will participate in the event, in which they will honor women from their districts for their exemplary commitment to community service and civic responsibility.

Ivy Bottini is a current Advisory Board member and a founder of the Gay and Lesbian Elder Housing Corporation, the first non-profit organization dedicated to building affordable apartments specifically for senior lesbians, gay men, bisexuals and transgender people. Bottini also co-chairs the Lesbian and Gay Advisory Board of the City of West Hollywood. She has also chaired that city's Addiction and Recovery Task Force and served as a Board Member of the West Hollywood Orchestra. When she was a resident of Los Angeles, Bottini helped to found the Lesbian/Gay Police Advisory Task Force.



She has been an advocate on behalf of women and the LGBT communities for four decades, beginning with

her work in the National Organization for Women in 1966. Since then, Bottini has remained active for social change. In 1981, she was the first open lesbian to serve on the California Commission on Aging, and in 1983 was a founding member of AIDS Project Los Angeles. She has been a committed activist for people with AIDS

since the beginning of the epidemic. Bottini has been consistently involved in electoral politics and mentored many young people through their introduction to the political process. She has been a devoted member of the Metropolitan Community Church of Los Angeles and a member of the Church's Board.

Bottini is also a visual artist and actor, whose work can be viewed on her website: ivybottini.com.

"I am so proud and happy to celebrate Ivy Bottini's contributions," says Senator Kuehl. "Ivy is a great role model as a community leader and active citizen. Her commitment to civil and human rights, civic vitality and, in particular, the advancement of LGBT people has inspired three generations. We are lucky to be able to honor her, and, in return, she brings honor to the 23rd District as our Woman of The Year."

Robin Podolsky is Senator Kuehl's Press Secretary.

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sue for her here in the district. We have been deeply involved ever since.

That same year, 1994, two workers at SSFL were killed in an explosion. Subsequent investigation by federal authorities determined that the explosion was caused by the burning of hazardous materials as a routine practice of illegal disposal of such materials. Rocketdyne, the site operator, pled guilty to three felony counts of illegal disposal of hazardous materials and paid a \$6.5 million fine.

It was recently revealed that a federal grand jury is investigating the site once again, this time apparently focused on releases of toxic materials offsite through surface water releases from the site.

This has been a frustrating process for Senator Kuehl, for me, and for many of our constituents. Decades after the initial contamination first occurred, cleanup is excruciatingly slow and of questionable thoroughness. Several years ago, the Department of Energy an-

nounced that it was not going to clean the radioactive contamination up to EPA standards, something it had promised to do in the mid-1990s. Instead, they indicated that 99% of the contaminated soil would be left in place and the site then released for unrestricted residential use. Two years ago, EPA formally stated that the proposed cleanup would leave the site unsafe for anything other than day hikes with limited picnicking. Yet the federal Department of Energy continues to move towards ending the cleanup and releasing the site for potential housing.

Senator Kuehl has repeatedly tried to get state legislation passed that would have required that the cleanup be consistent with DOE's past promises and EPA's concerns. Heavy lobbying by the owners of the site has been successful in heading off the legislation. The situation remains unresolved. More to follow in our next newsletters.

Laura Plotkin is Senator Kuehl's Chief Deputy in the District Office.