

Consensus on Site 300 contamination

By Michael Ellis Langley | Posted: Wednesday, October 4, 2017 1:00 pm

A citizen watchdog group and the Environmental Protection Agency agree that continued funding is the only way to make sure a polluted test site near Tracy is fully cleaned up.

Tri-Valley Communities Against a Radioactive Environment, a private organization that monitors work at Lawrence Livermore National Laboratory, hosted a town hall Thursday evening with the EPA. The group is concerned about contamination of an 11-square-mile facility along Corral Hollow Road southwest of Tracy called Site 300. The site is managed by the Department of Energy and has been used for years for experiments to test America's nuclear arsenal.

“Various experiments were conducted. ... Those included detonations of materials — depleted uranium was used. Also perchlorate, which is used in explosives. Perchlorate's a salt that gets into water and it travels distances. It's a thyroid disruptor,” Andrew Bain, the EPA's project manager for the cleanup of Site 300, explained. “A lot of those chemicals were stored. Some of those chemicals got into the ground and leached into the ground.”

Bain described other toxic solvents and gases — including tritium, which is radioactive hydrogen, and nitrate — that had also been found at the test facility. He was clear that those contaminants had not been detected near Tracy.

In 1990, Site 300 was added to a list of sites that are contaminated with hazardous materials governed by the Comprehensive Environmental Response, Compensation, and Liability Act of 1980, also called Superfund.

The EPA monitors contaminants and manages the cleanup of Site 300. Tri-Valley CAREs was formed as a watchdog group in Livermore more than 30 years ago. Today, members monitor the EPA's work and organize community talks to spread information about the lab and Site 300.

According to the group's technical adviser, environmental scientist Peter Strauss, people who work at Site 300 should not have to increase their risk of cancer as part of their career.

“We all have risks in our lives. We expose ourselves to risks. Some people are smokers,” Strauss said. “But in the case of contaminated sites, you did not choose to increase your risk.”

Strauss added that because the chemicals and depleted uranium are in the ground, wildfires may make the contaminants airborne.

He expressed concern that Tracy Hills — a master-planned development that broke ground in May 2016 near Corral Hollow Road and Interstate 580 — abuts the northern border of Site 300. Bain said the EPA is



Tri-Valley CAREs

Andrew Bain, the EPA's project manager for the Site 300 Superfund cleanup, talks to more than two dozen people during a public meeting Thursday evening about the contamination at the test facility near Tracy.

keeping a close eye on that.

“Obviously growth is moving towards Site 300. So one of the things we’re mindful of is, What’s the nature of the investigations as far as contaminations and the potential for it to get off-site. Because, obviously, our interest is to make sure that we address all contaminants that relate to the site,” he said.

According to the Tracy Hills environmental impact report found that explosives testing at Site 300 posed a “less-than-significant” risk to future residents but that other elements of the facility’s operation, including transportation of hazardous materials to or from the site, might pose a risk.

Bain said the best available data show that a full cleanup could take between 50 and 80 years. He and Strauss were both worried about funding to continue the removal of toxic substances from the test facility.

“I’ve got to say there’s been a great deal of progress at Site 300,” Strauss said. “I think the staff at Site 300, the environmental staff, has done a good job, but it’s got to continue.”

Bain added that funding for Superfund cleanup has been reduced for the past eight years.

“The problem would be, if those treatment systems were not operating, the plumes (of toxic contaminants) could migrate,” Bain said. “That’s part of the importance ... of making sure there is funding for the ongoing remediation of the site.”

Tri-Valley CAREs maintains a website, and the EPA’s information about Site 300 can be found online here.