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My Impressions of Livermore Lab's Site 300 Tour

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On June 27, I accompanied community members from Tracy, Livermore and the surrounding area on a tour of Lawrence Livermore Lab's High Explosives Testing area, known as Site 300. Site 300 is an area of about eleven square miles in the Altamont Hills between Livermore and Tracy. Livermore Lab uses this land to test high explosives in support of its nuclear weapons research and development. I learned that because of high levels of heavy metals, tritium (which is radioactive hydrogen), depleted uranium, and other contaminants, Site 300 is listed as a "Superfund" site, or one of the nation's most "uncontrolled hazardous waste sites."

The community members and I were very grateful for the brief look into the testing of explosives and radioactive materials occurring so close to our homes. We arrived at the site, were told to leave our cell phones, cameras, or any other devices capable of recording in our cars, and were handed radiation monitors to be clipped onto our clothes. These monitors did not give a visual reading for radiation, so I asked a lab worker what would happen if, for example, I fell and was exposed to depleted uranium while wearing it. Would I know what level of radiation I was being exposed to? She responded that although I was not able to see the radiation level, someone from the lab would read it later, and he would call me and let me know if I was exposed to large amounts of radiation.

We piled into a bus, and the men and women working for the lab and the Department of Energy exuded airs of pride in their clean-up work, as they highlighted their recent successes in lowering concentrations of radioactive and toxic waste in the soil and the groundwater.

Like many of the community members at the tour I was previously ignorant of many goings on at the site, so was grateful at my chance to ask questions of these men and women. I was also hesitant to buy into the boasting of some of the lab's recent accomplishments. Don't get me wrong, a few of the lab's clean-up efforts have been impressive, like the Eastern General Services Area or "GSA," where use of pump wells and treatment facilities have successfully treated the contaminated groundwater back to the state's drinking water standards. However, at other sites, I found myself very confused because the "accomplishment" involved radioactive decay and dispersion.

Overall, my brief peek into Site 300 left me with conflicting feelings. A few of the lab's employees, particularly those in charge of the environmental clean-up effort, were very excited about the headway the lab was making since the 1990's.

And I can't blame them—In fact I share their excitement for all of their accomplishments too. However at the same time I felt that other lab employees wanted to get back to their weapons work without us troublemakers whining about a clean environment, and radioactive-free drinking water and soil. Amidst this, throughout the tour at the back of my mind was a constantly nagging question: is the need for a more efficient killing machine really worth so much radioactive and toxic contamination?