

ABBY JOHNSON'S

INTERVIEW WITH RON DAMELE

EUREKA COUNTY, NEVADA

YUCCA MOUNTAIN LESSONS LEARNED PROJECT

held in

EUREKA, NEVADA

May 18, 2011

1 MS. CLANCY: Okay, tape is rolling. Today is May
2 18, 2011. We're in Eureka, Nevada. We're in the courthouse,
3 restored courthouse. And, doing the interview today is Abby
4 Johnson.

5 MS. JOHNSON: My name is Abby Johnson. I'm the
6 Nuclear Waste Advisor for Eureka County. We're doing the
7 Eureka County Lessons Learned video project, and today we're
8 interviewing Ron Damele, who is the Public Works Director and
9 also is the Director of the County's Nuclear Waste Program.
10 And, we are in the historic courtroom in the historic
11 courthouse of Eureka County, in the Town of Eureka.

12 Ron, tell us what your background is when you came
13 to Eureka and what you do for the County?

14 MR. DAMELE: I was born in 1962 in Elko, Nevada,
15 and I was raised on a ranch in central Eureka County, went to
16 school in Eureka and Elko. Went to work for the County in
17 the early 1980's, and worked up through the ranks, and
18 through a leadman, road superintendent, and then eventually
19 Public Works Director. And, I've been the Public Works
20 Director now for about seven years, and it seems like 17.

21 MS. JOHNSON: I was going to say.

22 MR. DAMELE: And, I really like it. It's a great
23 job. It's a challenge every day. It's one of those jobs
24 where you, you know, you're excited to get out of bed every
25 morning because you don't know what's going to come up.

1 So, I took over for a long time Director of Public
2 Works, Lenny Fiorenzi, and part of what we do is we're in
3 charge of all the utilities and roads and the buildings and
4 then anything that comes along that really doesn't fit in
5 anybody else's department, comes to the Public Works
6 Department. So, as such, we were also responsible for
7 oversight of the Yucca Mountain Program.

8 MS. JOHNSON: Let's move on to the next question.

9 Ron, as Public Works Director, as you said, you're
10 responsible for the County's Yucca Mountain Program. Can you
11 tell us about the program and your interest and concerns?

12 MR. DAMELE: Yes. The program is managed by the
13 Public Works Director, myself, and we have a suite of
14 consultants that assist us with the technical portions of the
15 project. I'm responsible for coordinating those efforts with
16 yourself, and--I need to think about that for a few minutes.

17 As you know, we're an affected unit of local
18 government, and as such, we receive each year that funding is
19 available, funds from DOE as direct grant payment. And, what
20 we do is we use that money very conservatively, because there
21 are years--there has been years in the past where we did not
22 receive any, and we had to carry--our balance had to carry us
23 across that period of time.

24 So, what we have done is we've done several studies
25 and hired consultants to help us identify issues with the

1 rail route, and issues with truck transport, because we had--
2 we felt that there would be truck transport of nuclear waste
3 before the rail was constructed. And, we felt that there
4 were some issues, concerns that the County had, that are
5 unique to Eureka County, that needed to be addressed,
6 especially with the rail, in Palisade Canyon, with the river
7 in close proximity to the rail route, with a number of
8 bridges and tunnels that are there, and with the truck
9 traffic, flooding, wild fires, snowstorms. And, there's only
10 certain places where trucks can pull over for safe havens to
11 stay if there's a problem.

12 MS. JOHNSON: We've had some problems in the past
13 with that, haven't we?

14 MR. DAMELE: We have, particularly in the north
15 part of the county, is very susceptible to wildland fires,
16 very large wildland fires. After the wildland fires are over
17 with, they are a hazard in themselves, but what we've found
18 is after the wild fires have gone through, there's a
19 tremendous amount of ash, and whenever the wind blows, it
20 creates a dust hazard on the freeway. And, we have had, in
21 two different locations and two different years, multiple
22 fatalities and multiple car pile-ups that were the result of
23 wildland fire dust storms.

24 So, you know, we understand there's a hazard there,
25 and we wanted to make sure that that was identified and

1 studied and different alternatives were looked at.

2 MS. JOHNSON: When those dust storms occurred, the
3 Highway Patrol closed the highway; right? And, that led to
4 some secondary creative driving for some truck drivers?

5 MR. DAMELE: That did. What happens--well, prior
6 to the Highway Patrol closing the road, several trucks--they
7 have a better visibility than cars. So, they could see that
8 there was a problem. They pulled over to the shoulder of the
9 road and stopped. And, subsequently, what happened was there
10 was a multi-car pile-up.

11 MS. JOHNSON: But, then, didn't some of the trucks
12 try to go around, wasn't there a spinach truck incident?

13 MR. DAMELE: There was two different incidents, one
14 was a spinach truck and one was a truck hauling hogs. And,
15 they tried to take an alternate route, which was not--you
16 couldn't take in a big vehicle.

17 MS. JOHNSON: Even in the best of weather?

18 MR. DAMELE: Ever, in this particular area. So,
19 what happened was, the hogs truck tipped over on its side.
20 Several hogs were killed. And, the County also had a minor
21 mishap up there when we went up to reopen the road and deal
22 with the hog problem.

23 And, then, another time, a spinach truck got hung
24 up on that road, and it was quite an endeavor to get him off
25 the side of the mountain as well.

1 MS. JOHNSON: And, that's near Palisade?

2 MR. DAMELE: That is, it's called Airplane Pass.

3 MS. JOHNSON: And, that Palisade area is kind of a
4 complicated transportation area with the train coming through
5 and the water from the Humboldt River?

6 MR. DAMELE: Right. And, there's two tunnels and
7 multiple bridges in that area, and it's one of the only
8 places that I'm aware of in this part of the country where
9 the tracks cross over the top of each other, the railroad
10 tracks.

11 MS. JOHNSON: The east and the west?

12 MR. DAMELE: The east and the west.

13 MS. JOHNSON: Sort of like a rail spaghetti bowl?

14 MR. DAMELE: Yes, only with water at the bottom of
15 the bowl.

16 MS. JOHNSON: Let's move on to the next question.

17 I know that fairly recently, a grain train derailed
18 in that general area. Are you familiar with that?

19 MR. DAMELE: I am. Probably two or three years
20 ago, I received a call on the weekend from the Union Pacific
21 Railroad letting me know that they had a train en route from
22 the Midwest to California, loaded with corn, that derailed in
23 Palisade--actually, it was right--would be in the Town of
24 Palisade, if it was still there. And, it took out one of the
25 main bridges, I think the bridge was constructed in 1909, and

1 it also derailed partially in the tunnel that is adjacent to
2 the bridge. And, I think there were seven or eight cars that
3 derailed. There was no injuries. Very significant damage
4 that resulted in fairly substantial clean-up operation from
5 the railroad, and a very hastily put together program to
6 rebuild the bridge and to establish, reestablish the track,
7 which now has a modern bridge, and it's a much safer track.

8 MS. JOHNSON: Let's move on to the next question.

9 Let's talk about the Yucca Mountain tours that
10 you've been on. We've got a couple of props today. We've
11 got a little graphic from the March 2002 Geo Times, and I
12 guess another graphic that the Department of Energy put
13 together showing the surface and subsurface of Yucca
14 Mountain.

15 When you went on the tours of Yucca Mountain, what
16 were your observations and reflections?

17 MR. DAMELE: My first observation was how much
18 money was put into the infrastructure of the buildings and
19 the tunnel and the--how much equipment they had, and also how
20 clean the underground was. It was--everything was tied up,
21 ventilation was perfect throughout the tunnel system.
22 Usually, underground you have warm spots where there's dead
23 air, and then you have cool spots where you have air moving,
24 and there was none of this. So, the overall look of the
25 facility was not a traditional underground operation. You

1 could tell this was a government job.

2 And, the other thing that really caught my eye was
3 the stability of the rock. They used timbering, non-
4 conventional timbering, it was shoring more of an iron and
5 shotcrete for a ways, and then from then on through the rest
6 of the tunnel, there was virtually no shoring, and it was
7 basically solid rock with very few fractures or fissures, and
8 there was no water dripping, which is very unusual for an
9 underground mining operation. And, I was fairly impressed
10 with the amount of testing and observations that were going
11 on. And, they had--you would never imagine they were looking
12 at all these different issues and concerns that were
13 underground.

14 MS. JOHNSON: Did you also go to the top of the
15 mountain?

16 MR. DAMELE: We did. We went to the top of the
17 mountain and, you know, looked around. But, it's not too
18 impressive. It's just the top of a mountain.

19 MS. JOHNSON: And, the last time you took the tour,
20 it was right before they closed down Yucca Mountain, wasn't
21 it?

22 MR. DAMELE: It was--actually, we were the last
23 tour, and when we left, they shut the lights out, and as far
24 as I know, that was the last time the lights were ever turned
25 back on there.

1 MS. JOHNSON: Yeah, and we also went to the test
2 site at the same time?

3 MR. DAMELE: We did. We took a tour of the test
4 site, and it was a very informative tour, and we had a great
5 tour guide and we saw a lot of the tests that we had only
6 heard about or read about.

7 MS. JOHNSON: And, some of the new stuff, too?

8 MR. DAMELE: And, some of the new stuff, too.

9 MS. JOHNSON: That they are starting to do. Yeah.
10 Let's move on to the next question.

11 Ron, I know that several times, we've been back to
12 Washington, D.C. to meet with agencies and officials
13 regarding the Yucca Mountain project and our concerns and
14 interests. Can you talk a little bit about that?

15 MR. DAMELE: Sure. I think we've been back three
16 different times, and we've met with our Congressional
17 delegation and expressed our concerns about the project to
18 them, and they were always very receptive and eager to talk
19 to us about the project.

20 We met with the Federal Railroad Administration. I
21 was probably most impressed with talking with them about rail
22 through Eureka County, and they're very familiar with the
23 rail that goes through Eureka County, because it's in
24 Palisade Canyon and they understand the challenges that they
25 have there with the erosion and the high water years and the

1 wildland fires and the derailment. So, I was impressed with
2 the Federal Railroad Administration, and they understood
3 where Eureka County, Nevada was.

4 And, then, we met with DOE, and chatted with them
5 about what was--we did a lot of talking with them about what
6 was going to happen next, when the EIS was going to come out
7 and what was going to be considered, and they were always
8 very pleasant and very cordial, but we didn't always get a
9 lot of valuable information from them.

10 MS. JOHNSON: What about the NRC?

11 MR. DAMELE: The NRC was probably one of the, for a
12 federal agency, we got a lot more information from the NRC on
13 what they were--how they viewed the project, and what their
14 concerns were and what they were looking at. And, I think we
15 did good there.

16 MS. JOHNSON: I think they were freer to talk to us
17 before the licensing proceeding began, and after the
18 licensing proceeding began, it was a little more difficult.

19 MR. DAMELE: I agree.

20 MS. JOHNSON: Any other impressions or thoughts
21 about D.C.?

22 MR. DAMELE: No.

23 MS. JOHNSON: Let's move on to the next question.

24 When you met with people in Washington, D.C. on the
25 Yucca Mountain issue and they were cordial, did it seem like

1 they really could understand Eureka County's concerns?

2 MR. DAMELE: Well, when we met with DOE, they
3 acknowledged our concerns, but I don't think they understood
4 them. DOE was cordial, but they don't like to hear what our
5 real feelings were. I think DOE had a hard time
6 understanding why the State of Nevada was against the
7 project, but yet there were certain counties that were for
8 it, and there were certain counties that were against it.
9 And, of course, we were neutral.

10 And, I think they felt that there were a lot worse
11 things that went on in that area on the Nevada Test Site, why
12 is everybody so worried about putting nuclear waste in there,
13 because I believe they firmly believed that it was going to
14 be very safe and there wasn't going to be any other issues.

15 So, I don't think they sympathized with us, and
16 they darned sure didn't understand us. I mean, we're in
17 Nevada and they're in Washington, D.C., and when they come
18 from Washington, D.C., they go to Las Vegas. They don't come
19 to Eureka to see what Eureka looks like. They're in Las
20 Vegas. Well, until you come here and you look around and you
21 drive out in the country and you see what we have, you don't
22 have an understanding about what we're all about and what we
23 represent and what we've always had here.

24 So, you know, it's going to be, when you start
25 transporting nuclear waste across the country and you're

1 coming down--I mean, I'm taking my family to Elko to get
2 groceries and I'm passing a nuclear waste truck hauling waste
3 down Highway 278, that hits home. I mean, in Washington,
4 D.C., you wouldn't even think twice about that, or in
5 downtown Las Vegas. But, I don't think they understand how
6 we operate here.

7 MS. JOHNSON: Let's move on to the next question.

8 If a federal agency were to take this project on
9 again, what do you think they could do differently in terms
10 of relationships with local government?

11 MR. DAMELE: I think that it would be very
12 beneficial for them to have a single point of contact for
13 each affected unit of local government or city or town, that
14 you would have a relationship with, and they understood your
15 community, they understood your concerns, they understood
16 where you were coming from, and why you were concerned and
17 why your folks were concerned. And, then, they would be the
18 ones that would be able to communicate that up to their
19 superiors and let them know how the feelings were in these
20 communities. Without that, it's up to us to communicate with
21 these directors and these people that don't have a clue where
22 Eureka, Nevada is.

23 When we go to Washington, D.C., they're there,
24 they're congenial, they're listening to us, but they don't
25 know where we're at or what we're--they just know what their

1 secretary told them about us five minutes before we showed
2 up. So, that's what I would recommend, is they get a little
3 more personal with the people that they're representing.

4 MS. JOHNSON: Ron, as you know, Eureka County is an
5 "Affected unit of local government under Section 116 of the
6 Nuclear Waste Policy Act." Can you explain what that means,
7 and what our relationship has been with the other affected
8 units of local government?

9 MR. DAMELE: Because we're a county that's adjacent
10 to Nye County, who is the site county, we are an affected
11 unit of local government. Our relationship with the other
12 affected units of local government, for the most part, is
13 very good. We've partnered on studies and projects. We've
14 collaborated with them on reports, and we especially work
15 well with Irene Navis in Clark County, who has always
16 supported what we've termed the smaller mice of the AULG.
17 She's always very supportive of us. She did a very good job,
18 and she's a great mediator in these meetings that we would
19 have, determining funding for the upcoming year.

20 Everybody--not everybody came away with what they
21 wanted, but they accepted it. And, she was a big part of
22 that, and she always gave up more than I thought she really
23 needed to to make everybody whole.

24 We worked well with Mineral County, with Lander
25 County, and White Pine County. We've worked with Lincoln on

1 different things as well, and it's just been a--I think I've
2 met some of the smartest people I've ever met through the
3 Yucca Mountain Program.

4 MS. JOHNSON: Let's move on to the next question.

5 Ron, I'm looking at this document from the U.S.
6 Weather Bureau, October of 1956. It's entitled "The
7 Distribution of Significant Fallout from Nevada Tests." I
8 know that your family experienced some--had some experiences
9 related to Atomic testing, and I would like you to tell us
10 about that.

11 MR. DAMELE: Sure.

12 MS. JOHNSON: And, you probably want to look at
13 this document as well.

14 MR. DAMELE: I remember, as a young kid in the
15 early Sixties, middle 1960's, that the DOE would come to the
16 ranch, the JD, and they'd drop off a plastic, I believe it
17 was a plastic jug, and then we would have to--because we
18 milked our own cows, and they would want my grandmother to
19 fill it up, and then in a few days time, they would come back
20 and pick it up. And, I was always curious about what they
21 were looking at, and we always knew they were looking for
22 radiation, but we didn't know what radiation was or what it
23 did to you or anything like that.

24 But, now, come to find out, it was, you know, it
25 would have been handy for us to know what exactly was the

1 results of the testing of the milk, because we all drank milk
2 from the milk cow, and we made our own cheese and we made our
3 own cottage cheese, and, you know, we didn't go to the store
4 and buy milk, so we drank that.

5 So, you know, now with this whole downwinders
6 program, my dad and my uncles go and they get tested once a
7 year in Ely. In fact, my dad just got back. He went there
8 last week. So, obviously, milk must have had some sort of
9 radiation in it, because they've developed this downwinders
10 program, and a good portion of my family that was on the
11 ranch at that time has died from cancer.

12 And, I can remember my granddad telling me that
13 there were occasions where they were out riding after a
14 nuclear test, and they would come in and their faces would be
15 burning, and it would be like they had a bad sunburn. And,
16 after a few days, it would go away. And, not after every
17 test, but just certain tests.

18 MS. JOHNSON: Did the animals have any effects?

19 MR. DAMELE: Not that I'm aware of. No, not that
20 I'm aware of. But, it's almost, it's too bad that they even
21 have to have the downwinders program, it's too bad they just
22 didn't pay closer attention to where the wind was blowing. I
23 mean, obviously, somebody was paying attention, because this
24 document shows the wind directions and, you know, the wind
25 directions were all east or north, and there was never any--

1 very few tests that were conducted where, you know, the wind
2 was blowing towards Las Vegas or California.

3 MS. JOHNSON: Okay.

4 MR. DAMELE: So, right here, you can see the Buster
5 Jangle test that was in November 1951, and here's Eureka and
6 here's the test, and the wind direction is right towards
7 Eureka, Kimberly, Ruth, McGill, all this area. So,
8 obviously, they knew, you know, where the fallout was going.

9 The thing that I've learned about Japan and the
10 nuclear plants and the tsunamis is, I don't know if I've
11 learned it, but it's my observation that it doesn't really
12 make a lot of sense to put a nuclear power plant in a tsunami
13 zone. It just goes against--it's wrong on so many levels.

14 In fairness to the Japanese that succumbed to the
15 tsunami, I've learned that they have so many earthquakes in
16 Japan that, you know, it's just like second hat, it's no big
17 deal when there's an earthquake. Oh, well, it's an
18 earthquake, and nobody should get concerned about it. And,
19 obviously, I don't know what their level of tsunami warning
20 is, but apparently it wasn't very functional.

21 And you can kind of relate that to the Yucca
22 Mountain Project, where you have this tunnel and you have
23 this series of alcoves, and you're going to plant the nuclear
24 waste in here, and it's in an earthquake fault zone, so what
25 are we doing? I mean, here we are pointing the finger at

1 Japan, saying you shouldn't have done that, it not very
2 smart, but then we're considering putting nuclear waste in a
3 fault zone.

4 And, you know, there's water in close proximity to
5 that, and, so, we're going to contaminate water. It just
6 doesn't make any sense to me.

7 MS. JOHNSON: Thank you very much, Ron.

8 MR. DAMELE: You're welcome.

9 (Whereupon, the interview with Ron Damele was
10 concluded.)

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TRANSCRIBER'S CERTIFICATE

I hereby certify that the foregoing has been transcribed by me to the best of my ability, and constitutes a true and accurate transcript of the mechanically recorded proceedings in the above matter.

Dated at Aurora, Colorado, this 19th day of June, 2011.

s/s Mary Chevalier
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