

ABBY JOHNSON'S

INTERVIEW WITH JIM ITHURRALDE

EUREKA COUNTY, NEVADA

YUCCA MOUNTAIN LESSONS LEARNED PROJECT

held in

EUREKA, NEVADA

May 18, 2011

1 MS. CLANCY: Okay, we have the tape rolling. This  
2 is, let's see, we're going to just get your permission for  
3 this footage to be used as research. The DVDs of the whole  
4 interviews will be in archives available to the public. And,  
5 then, we'll be taking clips to put on the web. So, we just  
6 want to know if we have your permission to use your voice and  
7 image that way?

8 MR. ITHURRALDE: Yes, you do.

9 MS. CLANCY: Great, thank you. Okay, the tape is  
10 rolling. Today is May 18, 2011. We're in Eureka, Nevada.  
11 This is Gwen Clancy from behind the camera, and doing the  
12 interview today is Abby Johnson.

13 MS. JOHNSON: My name is Abby Johnson. I'm the  
14 Nuclear Waste Advisor for Eureka County, Nevada. This is the  
15 Eureka County Lessons Learned video project, and today we're  
16 talking with Commissioner Jim Ithurralde.

17 Jim, tell us what your background is, how you came  
18 to Eureka County.

19 MR. ITHURRALDE: Okay. I came to Eureka County  
20 when I was one year old. I moved to the Ferguson Ranch. My  
21 parents were sheep ranchers. And, I graduated from Eureka  
22 County High School in 1960. Then, I left--I went to college  
23 in Idaho, and after graduating from college, I came back to  
24 Eureka, went to work for the bank, the local branch here.  
25 And, then, I was drafted into the United States Army, and I

1 served two years overseas during the Vietnam era.

2 And, then I came back and went back to work at the  
3 bank. Then, I was transferred to Elko, and I served seven  
4 years in Elko, and I came back to Eureka as branch manager of  
5 the local bank, and I was here one year and they wanted to  
6 transfer me to Tonopah, and that's when I quit the bank  
7 because my family was young and I had just moved them from  
8 Elko the year before.

9 So, I went to work a year later in the assessor's  
10 office, and I became the--I went to work in the assessor's  
11 office in 1975, and then in 1978, I was appointed the  
12 assessor fill in the expired term of the old assessor, Tom  
13 Pastorino (phonetic). And, subsequently, I was re-elected  
14 for seven terms as assessor of Eureka County, and I was in  
15 that position, and I retired from that position in 2006.  
16 And, I was elected Eureka County Commissioner, and I'm now in  
17 my second term as Commissioner for Eureka County.

18 MS. JOHNSON: Wow, that's a long history of public  
19 service.

20 MR. ITHURRALDE: Yes, a few days.

21 MS. JOHNSON: When you were growing up in Eureka,  
22 were you aware of the nuclear testing that was happening in  
23 southern Nevada?

24 MR. ITHURRALDE: Yes. When we really became aware  
25 of it, my dad's sheep rights were down south, which was just

1 north of Tonopah, so we were down there in the wintertime.  
2 So, yes, we're very aware of it. And, also I was aware of it  
3 at the school, because I think I was either in the third or  
4 fourth grade, I can't recall, but they put the little, like,  
5 little Geiger counters or whatever they were, little chest  
6 things we wore to see if there was any radiation up here.  
7 And, then, we also took a couple of field trips to the top of  
8 Pinto Summit, which is a summit that's about five miles south  
9 of here, and we sat up on the top in the school buses and saw  
10 the mushroom clouds, you know, they exploded. And, that was  
11 early in the mornings. I remember going up there.

12 MS. JOHNSON: Did you wear the badges all the time,  
13 or just on the days when the explosions--

14 MR. ITHURRALDE: Just on the days.

15 MS. JOHNSON: Okay.

16 MR. ITHURRALDE: And, I can't remember if we wore  
17 them for a couple days, you know, after the explosions.

18 MS. JOHNSON: Afterwards?

19 MR. ITHURRALDE: Right. I don't recall. But, I  
20 remember definitely wearing them little badges.

21 MS. JOHNSON: Did the government come around when  
22 your dad was doing his sheep ranching and talk to him, or  
23 check him--

24 MR. ITHURRALDE: I don't recall, and dad never did  
25 tell me. So, I don't remember.

1 MS. JOHNSON: When did you first become aware of  
2 the Yucca Mountain Repository project, and what was your  
3 reaction?

4 MR. ITHURRALDE: Probably the first time was they  
5 had tours, bus tours, and they asked the different  
6 communities and that, and we took a bus tour, I think it's  
7 when my son was a junior in high school, so that must have  
8 been like 1991 or '92, we took a tour down to the Yucca  
9 Mountain site, and that's the time when I really became aware  
10 of it. I knew it was happening, but the real--

11 MS. JOHNSON: And, what was that like. Let's go  
12 into the--let's talk about the tours.

13 MR. ITHURRALDE: It was just a, you know, they just  
14 explained what they were going to do, the type of site they  
15 were going to build, and they took us to the actual site.  
16 The tunnel wasn't even done yet.

17 MS. JOHNSON: Okay.

18 MR. ITHURRALDE: So, you know, they said this is  
19 where it's going to be.

20 MS. JOHNSON: So, that was before the tunnel boring  
21 machine was in place?

22 MR. ITHURRALDE: Yes.

23 MS. JOHNSON: Or any of that. You were just  
24 looking at--

25 MR. ITHURRALDE: The site.

1 MS. JOHNSON: At the mountain.

2 MR. ITHURRALDE: Exactly, yes.

3 MS. JOHNSON: Okay. And, then, you went back other  
4 times as the project progressed?

5 MR. ITHURRALDE: I only went one more time, and  
6 that was two or three years ago, we took the last tour of  
7 Yucca Mountain. In fact, they shut the lights off the day  
8 after we were there.

9 MS. JOHNSON: And, did you go in the middle when  
10 maybe you went on the railroad and went into the mountain?

11 MR. ITHURRALDE: We didn't go in too deep, because  
12 there no railroad, it had basically had already been shut  
13 down. So, we just walked into the tunnel, a little ways in  
14 there, and then we took a tour of the, you know, the Nevada  
15 Test Site also at that same time.

16 MS. JOHNSON: Yes. Let's go back and ask a  
17 question about public sentiment as an elected official for  
18 many years, you have a lot of contact with the public in  
19 Eureka County. Can you explain what you believe the public  
20 sentiment is about the Yucca Mountain Project in Eureka  
21 County, or maybe how it's changed over the years?

22 MR. ITHURRALDE: Well, Eureka County has always  
23 taken a neutral position. However, the people in the north,  
24 through the Crescent Valley area, that's where the rail, the  
25 proposed rail was going to come through right just east of

1 their town. They were definitely opposed to it because of  
2 the possibility of some type of accident on the train, or  
3 whatever.

4           The southern part of the County is pros and cons.  
5 You know, I'd say it was fifty-fifty. Some were against it,  
6 some were for it. So, I think most of them were for it  
7 because the people were for it, was they figured it was a  
8 good tax revenue for the State of Nevada. But, there were a  
9 lot of people, in fact my wife was definitely against it.  
10 Because she was also--her parents were also sheep people,  
11 too, and she knew about the downwinders and that, and she was  
12 very nervous because of that.

13           MS. JOHNSON: Okay. So, she was making the  
14 connection between the new project and the old project?

15           MR. ITHURRALDE: Yes.

16           MS. JOHNSON: When you were assessor, you helped  
17 the County's Yucca Mountain Information Office to do some  
18 mapping related to where the rail line was proposed to be in  
19 the Crescent Valley area. Can you tell us a little more  
20 about the Crescent Valley area and the private property  
21 conflicts? Your office was very helpful in identifying the  
22 extent to which there might be private property conflicts  
23 with the rail line.

24           MR. ITHURRALDE: Right. As you know, direct in the  
25 railroad history, there was--every ten miles east side of the

1 rail track, there was every other section became private and  
2 went to the railroad company. So, therefore, that road  
3 through the north end of our county, and I don't know if you  
4 can see this map, but there are several, every other section,  
5 is private?

6 MS. JOHNSON: Yes.

7 MR. ITHURRALDE: So, that was a conflict there for  
8 a lot of people.

9 MS. JOHNSON: That's known as the checkerboard?

10 MR. ITHURRALDE: You're right, the checkerboard.  
11 And, probably the biggest issue today on that railroad if it  
12 had ever gone through was there's a huge mine down in the  
13 Cortez area, and that would definitely have been a conflict  
14 because it would have went right through where that mine is  
15 today.

16 MS. JOHNSON: And, they're still doing more  
17 exploration, aren't they?

18 MR. ITHURRALDE: Yes, absolutely.

19 MS. JOHNSON: And, each one of those little private  
20 checkerboard squares isn't just one property owner, is it?

21 MR. ITHURRALDE: There's several property owners,  
22 yes, because some of these were subdivided into like little  
23 ten acre parcels, and five acre parcels, so there was, yes,  
24 several.

25 MS. JOHNSON: I think we found over 200 maybe out



1 of town property owners, maybe at least.

2 MR. ITHURRALDE: At least, definitely, yes. And,  
3 I'm sure, because I know when I was assessor, there was  
4 always, you know, exchange of property going on there all the  
5 time.

6 MS. JOHNSON: And, lots of out of town people who  
7 never even really knew what they owned?

8 MR. ITHURRALDE: A lot of them, we'd have some tax  
9 sales over the years, so a lot of them were sales that were  
10 done on the internet, and lot of these people were from  
11 Florida and probably had never been to the site, and probably  
12 still haven't been to the sites.

13 MS. JOHNSON: So, the internet sales are sort of  
14 the next generation of the first land speculation that was--

15 MR. ITHURRALDE: Yeah, I was the auctioneer I think  
16 in 2005 and I did it to help the clerk, because--for her  
17 sales of the delinquent parcels.

18 MS. JOHNSON: Yes.

19 MR. ITHURRALDE: And, a lot of those sales were  
20 through the internet. It was very interesting.

21 MS. JOHNSON: Yes. We talked about being on Yucca  
22 Mountain tours. Let's talk about when you went to  
23 Washington, D.C.

24 MR. ITHURRALDE: Okay.

25 MS. JOHNSON: You were--you are the County

1 Commission representative for the Yucca Mountain Project, and  
2 you went back to Washington on several occasions with our  
3 consultant, John Gervers, who helps us understand what's  
4 going on in Washington, and with other staff people. Tell us  
5 about your experiences and observations from those trips.

6 MR. ITHURRALDE: You know, you always study in the  
7 history books how the government works, and all that,  
8 government classes, so I actually, I got the feeling how our  
9 federal government really works. I was shocked after  
10 probably the second tour, the bureaucracy of the federal  
11 government. There seems to be an oversight committee for an  
12 oversight committee, if you know what I mean. So, it was a  
13 very good history lesson for me about our federal government.

14 MS. JOHNSON: Did you meet with DOE and with the  
15 Nuclear Regulatory Commission folks?

16 MR. ITHURRALDE: Yes, I met with the Nuclear  
17 Regulatory Commission, also the Department of Energy. And,  
18 basically, the Department of Transportation, we went to the  
19 railroad people, and we also went to the private side of  
20 these, like the rail company, and that. It was interesting  
21 to get their take of it, and the take from the federal  
22 government side, and it was kind of interesting to see how  
23 that was all coming together, or didn't come together.

24 MS. JOHNSON: Same topic, different information?

25 MR. ITHURRALDE: Yes.

1 MS. JOHNSON: Sometimes diametrically opposed?

2 MR. ITHURRALDE: Yes, absolutely.

3 MS. JOHNSON: And, also, we met, and I did go with  
4 you, we met with the nuclear power industry, too, on several  
5 occasions.

6 MR. ITHURRALDE: Yes. Right.

7 MS. JOHNSON: The Nuclear Energy Institute.

8 MR. ITHURRALDE: Right. And, they were probably  
9 upset because this is a promise that the government, he gave  
10 them that they would have this site, and they paid into that  
11 actually over the years, and it never ever happened, and it's  
12 not going to happen.

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

14 Jim, going back to what you were talking about  
15 earlier, being in grade school and witnessing the nuclear  
16 tests, could you tell us a little more about that?

17 MR. ITHURRALDE: Yeah, I remember some of the  
18 drills we did at school, too, you know where we dived  
19 underneath the desks. You know, that was some of the drills  
20 that we went through at that time.

21 And, I'd like to go back to when we used to go on  
22 top of Pinto Summit to watch the actual setting off of the  
23 bombs down south. We noticed the flash, we didn't actually  
24 see the mushroom, but we seen all this big flash, and all of  
25 us kids go wow, that was great. So, you know, as youngsters,

1 we had no fear at that time. So, you know, I can still  
2 remember, I can still see that flash out there, you know.

3 MS. JOHNSON: You still remember it in your mind?

4 MR. ITHURRALDE: Yeah, I do. You know, I mean it  
5 lit the whole southern sky. So, it was--it had to be awful  
6 big, because we're probably what, 300 miles north of where  
7 they actually set off the bombs. So, yeah, it was neat. We  
8 thought it was neat as children, you know, we had no fear at  
9 that time. You know, later on, they showed some of the  
10 negative stuff that by testing, what happened.

11 MS. JOHNSON: And, can I ask a follow-up question?  
12 When did that fear start to come in for you? When did you  
13 start to sense that there were some other issues besides  
14 excitement to do with a bomb going off?

15 MR. ITHURRALDE: Well, I think, you know, like the  
16 downwinders came on later, but I know we were always in the  
17 sheep industry, so we knew some of the stuff that happened in  
18 the State of Utah, where several sheep died from radioactive  
19 fallout, I mean, thousands and thousands of sheep. So,  
20 that's when we started to say there might be some negative  
21 impact from this testing.

22 MS. JOHNSON: There must have been some concern  
23 about the shepherders who were right there with the animals  
24 out in the wild.

25 MR. ITHURRALDE: Yeah, at that time, though, there

1 was--most of the shepherders were Bask, and that's my  
2 descendents, so we always figured a lot of these kids might  
3 have gone back to Europe, and what--how that affected them,  
4 you know, I really don't know if it did. But, I'm sure it  
5 probably did. So, we were very--you know, later on, we were  
6 very aware of what was going on, and the negative impact that  
7 these testings had on, you know, the environment, and  
8 whatever.

9 MS. JOHNSON: Well, even today, there's  
10 advertisements in the Eureka Sentinel Newspaper for the  
11 cancer screenings.

12 MR. ITHURRALDE: Yes.

13 MS. JOHNSON: People were exposed.

14 MR. ITHURRALDE: Yes.

15 MS. JOHNSON: Do you participate in that?

16 MR. ITHURRALDE: I have not, but my wife is because  
17 she also--they lived in the ranch that's about 100 miles  
18 south of Eureka, what's called the Willow Creek Ranch.

19 MS. JOHNSON: Yes.

20 MR. ITHURRALDE: At that same time when she was a  
21 small child. So, she is in the downwinder, you know, being  
22 tested. So, she has, you know, that fear, and because of  
23 that, she was adamantly against Yucca Mountain, because she  
24 remembered, you know, from that nuclear testing, and all  
25 that.

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

2 As a Commissioner, public health and safety for the  
3 residents of Eureka County is a primary responsibility for  
4 you. How have you considered the Yucca Mountain Project in  
5 that way?

6 MR. ITHURRALDE: Well, probably the biggest concern  
7 we had was--in the rail was, it would come through Eureka  
8 County, but it also, you know, the whole rail line crosses  
9 northern Eureka County, so we were concerned about the--in  
10 case of a spill or anything, you know, how much would it cost  
11 the counties for emergency management, you know, for our fire  
12 fighters, they would all have to be trained, and we were  
13 always concerned about that. The funding of that, how we  
14 could--how can I say--it was our responsibility to make sure  
15 that this was all covered, and that was one of our biggest  
16 concerns. That was one of my concerns going back to  
17 Washington, about how they would take care of local  
18 government also. In this case, in case--even if that didn't  
19 go through Crescent Valley, we knew they were still coming  
20 across the main rail lines across northern Eureka County, so  
21 that was always a concern of ours.

22 MS. JOHNSON: And, we just have volunteer emergency  
23 response?

24 MR. ITHURRALDE: Right. Yeah, even our fire  
25 department and our EMS are all volunteers, emergency people.

1 MS. JOHNSON: Let's move on to the next question.  
2 Jim, thank you very much for your time.

3 MR. ITHURRALDE: Yes. It was my pleasure, and  
4 Yucca Mountain gave me the opportunity to see how our federal  
5 government worked back in Washington, D.C. So, I was very  
6 pleased. I was very happy to represent Eureka County because  
7 we were one of the local governments that were affected by  
8 this project. So, again, thank you, and I'm glad I had the  
9 opportunity for this interview.

10 MS. JOHNSON: Thank you.

11 (Whereupon, the interview of Mr. Ithurralde was  
12 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 23<sup>rd</sup> day of June, 2011.

s/s Mary Chevalier  
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