

INTERVIEW OF MICHAEL MEARS

BY ABBY JOHNSON

EUREKA COUNTY, NEVADA

YUCCA MOUNTAIN LESSONS LEARNED PROJECT

held in

EUREKA CITY, NEVADA

1 MS. CLANCY: We're in Eureka County, in the Town of
2 Eureka. We're interviewing Michael Mears for the Yucca
3 Mountain Project Lessons Learned. And, interviewing today is
4 Abby Johnson.

5 MS. JOHNSON: Michael, we're interviewing today for
6 the Eureka County Lessons Learned Video Project. You've been
7 involved with Eureka County and the Yucca Mountain project
8 for a really long time.

9 When did you start working for the County?

10 MR. MEARS: I came to work for the Eureka County
11 Assessor's Office in July of 1997.

12 MS. JOHNSON: Well, that was a time for the Yucca
13 Mountain Project when Eureka County was just learning that
14 the Carlin Route was proposed to go through Crescent Valley.

15 MR. MEARS: That is correct.

16 MS. JOHNSON: Did you start to get involved with
17 helping on the Yucca Mountain Project in your job?

18 MR. MEARS: I did. Actually, I was initially hired
19 as a GIS technician to come in. The County had done some
20 work prior to my hire to develop a GIS system, but it had
21 essentially stalled out. So, the first several months that I
22 was employed with Eureka County, I was analyzing what data we
23 had acquired, what software we had available, and then I made
24 some recommendations to the County as to where we needed to
25 go from there to have a truly functional GIS program in the

1 County.

2 MS. JOHNSON: I think that one of the most useful
3 things that you were able to do was to build a live baseline
4 data that we needed to analyze. Can you talk a little bit
5 about the kinds of baseline data that you, the layers of the
6 GIS that you developed?

7 MR. MEARS: Sure. Again, we had some data that had
8 been provided, or warehoused, but was not being utilized.
9 And, one of the first things I recognized is we needed good
10 parcel data for the County that would have good ownership
11 information, well defined parcel boundaries, and what-not,
12 because in order to do like a private/public land analysis to
13 see where we were impacting private landowners, we didn't
14 have that data available, so that was one of the first steps
15 that we made, was to develop a comprehensive parcel database.

16 We did that. It took us about a year and a half to
17 complete that project and have that data available. But,
18 once we did, we were able to do analysis such as this, where
19 we were able to take a look at what was the proposed Yucca
20 Mountain corridor, and we were able to do buffers and we did
21 several different analysis. This particular analysis was a
22 five mile buffer from the rail line itself, to see what we
23 were impacting in terms of our private and public ownership.

24 This is basically, this is where the original rail
25 line runs, and this is where the Yucca Mountain corridor--the

1 Carlin corridor was proposed to come off. Basically, the
2 yellow and the green, this magenta color, all of that is
3 private landownership, and it's a checker board because of
4 the rail property that exists in the north end of Eureka
5 County. But, what we've discovered is we're impacting a lot
6 of private land where this rail runs.

7 And, when we actually looked at where the majority
8 of our real property, or what I should say parcel density in
9 the County lies is right here, right where this proposed
10 corridor was going to come through, substantial residential
11 development right here in the Town of Crescent Valley, and,
12 you know, some spotty residential development throughout the
13 Valley. But, this was essentially splitting this Valley
14 into, and greatly affecting a large amount of private land.

15 MS. JOHNSON: Can you explain the nature of the
16 small parcels in Crescent Valley? I call it "dream in the
17 desert," but that people from all over the country own
18 property in Crescent Valley.

19 MR. MEARS: What happened is back in around the
20 late 1960's and early 1970's, a couple of different
21 developers came into the Crescent Valley area. Again, this
22 patchwork ground of every other section being owned by the
23 Federal Government came about because of the rail line being
24 pushed out west. They bought up several of these sections,
25 and then because there were no parcel laws per se in effect,

1 they just started dividing these out.

2 One of the earliest developments that they were
3 trying to create a population area in was the Town of
4 Crescent Valley. So, you could buy a lot in the Town of
5 Crescent Valley, and you would get a second parcel of land in
6 one of their other subdivisions with the purchase of that lot
7 in Crescent Valley.

8 MS. JOHNSON: A two for one special?

9 MR. MEARS: Essentially. And a lot of those, you
10 know, it was a \$20 down and \$20 a month for the next 20 year
11 type of contracts, and some of those contracts are still out
12 there and still being paid off. Many of the original owners
13 have since passed those properties on to heirs, and what-not.
14 But, that's where all the parcel density came from, was that
15 active development.

16 There is active gold mining in the southern end of
17 Crescent Valley, and so there was a lot of speculation at
18 that time as to where that gold mining might go in the future
19 and where population centers might ultimately need to be to
20 handle the workforce that would be working there.

21 At this point today, Crescent Valley has roughly
22 200 people in the town site, and the surrounding area
23 probably another 100. So, the Valley is not as populated as
24 the parcel density would make one think. But, a big part of
25 that, too, is the utility development hasn't taken place in

1 the Valley that I think was originally speculated as well.
2 The power grid has not expanded away from the town site.
3 Right now, it's all basically domestic wells and septic
4 systems as far as water and sewage. So, it never really
5 exploded in the way that I think the original developers and
6 speculators thought that it might. But, it did create a
7 great amount of parcel density.

8 MS. JOHNSON: And, many individual owners.

9 MR. MEARS: Many.

10 MS. JOHNSON: Because I remember when we were
11 trying to let all of the private property owners know about
12 the Draft Environmental Impact Statement availability and
13 hearings, that your office provided labels so that we could
14 mail a post card to these absentee owners. And, I think
15 there were maybe 200. I'm not sure of the number. But, it
16 seemed like there were quite a few.

17 MR. MEARS: Again, when we did this analysis and
18 you see that parcel density, almost every one of those
19 parcels has an individual owner, and most of them are not
20 necessarily living on that parcel. They're absent owners. A
21 lot of these parcels sold again in the early Seventies, and
22 it was an opportunity--this was marketed nationally at the
23 time. So, people from all over the country had an
24 opportunity to buy a piece of ground in an unchartered area
25 of Nevada. So, yeah, there's still today a lot of owners,

1 and they are spread out all over, I mean even globally at
2 this point.

3 MS. JOHNSON: Well, we, once we brought that to the
4 attention of the Department of Energy through the EIS
5 process, ultimately, that ended up being one of the reasons
6 why the Carlin rail route was not selected as the first
7 choice, was because of the many many land use conflicts, and
8 having to do eminent domain and negotiations with 200 or 300
9 property owners, when at first when they looked at the map,
10 it looked like there were no property owners that they would
11 have to deal with.

12 MR. MEARS: That's correct. You know, on the
13 initial face of looking at where this rail corridor would
14 run, and that would come from, when we did some of our
15 topographic analysis, what I think people were looking at in
16 the early stages was running this rail line down--this is
17 flat, it's very flat land, it's very open, and I think they
18 saw this big gap between the mountains of Nevada and said
19 what a great place, we can shoot this line straight down
20 through there. And, it wasn't until we had this capability
21 with our GIS to say this is going to impact an awful lot of
22 people, and you're going to have to deal with all of these
23 private property owners if you're going to run this rail line
24 through Crescent Valley.

25 MS. JOHNSON: Let's move onto the next question.

1 So, I understand that there was actually lakefront property
2 in Crescent Valley. Can you talk about that a little bit?

3 MR. MEARS: That is correct. Again, when we were
4 talking about parcel density, one of the most dense areas as
5 far as parceling is right here. This is an area known as the
6 Nevelco Units, the Nevelco Subdivisions, and the patch right
7 in the center here is known as Crescent Lake. Crescent Lake
8 was marketed as a lake, and all these parcels around the lake
9 were sold as essentially lakefront property. This is
10 actually just a dry alkali bed.

11 But, again, this was marketed throughout the
12 country, and people purchased this ground thinking that they
13 were buying lakefront property in beautiful Crescent Valley,
14 Nevada.

15 MS. JOHNSON: Obviously sight unseen?

16 MR. MEARS: 90 percent of the parcels that were
17 sold during the late Sixties and Seventies were sold sight
18 unseen. And, again, one of the interesting aspects of that
19 is today, those are being passed on to heirs who have never
20 been out here either. And, so, they call my office and want
21 to talk to myself or my staff to find out about this great
22 chunk of ground they own in Crescent Valley.

23 When this whole rail corridor thing was being
24 discussed, and it's, you know, all through the process, and
25 even today still, I will get calls of people wanting to know

1 when the nuclear waste is coming through Crescent Valley. A
2 lot of people had mixed feelings. Some of these absent
3 landowners actually figured they were going to make some good
4 money on their property if the rail line passed by it.
5 Others were greatly afraid that they weren't going to be able
6 to come out here and build a retirement home at some point
7 because the rail line was going to be there.

8 So, you know, throughout my time, not only as
9 dealing with the GIS side, but also now as the assessor, I
10 have dealt with both sides of the Yucca Mountain issue as far
11 as how it impacts Eureka County.

12 MS. JOHNSON: That kind of leads into a question
13 about property values and stigma. Certainly, one of the
14 objections that Clark County has had to the nuclear waste
15 project is a concern about the potential effects of nuclear
16 waste transportation on tourism and on property values.
17 Similarly, in Santa Fe, New Mexico with the Waste Isolation
18 Pilot Project, there were concerns about property values and
19 there was a court case around that.

20 Can you talk a little bit about property values and
21 stigma and Yucca Mountain in relation to Eureka County?

22 MR. MEARS: Certainly. I think I would start that
23 conversation, and again I keep referring to this same map,
24 but, you know, our initial--some of the initial conversations
25 that were held, especially at Crescent Valley Town Hall

1 meetings, were concerns about what happens with this coming
2 through the Valley. You know, and as I just said a moment
3 ago, there were two sides. Some people were hoping to
4 capitalize on the government needing their ground and they
5 would pay a premium to buy their ground to run this rail line
6 through, but those that were already living here, or had
7 aspirations of building out here, were greatly feared of what
8 might happen if there was a nuclear rail line coming through,
9 the potential of some sort of accident taking place, and what
10 that could ultimately do to the impacts. And, I think we
11 heard more from those people that were fearing the decline in
12 property values and what might happen just on a public safety
13 level.

14 The other part of this is you've got a great amount
15 of agricultural land, all this green is agricultural ranch
16 land. Down in the south area here, there's a number of
17 alfalfa pivots that are producing high quality alfalfa hay.
18 And, not on this map, but to the southeast, I can kind of
19 show it here, this is where--this is the area that we have
20 blown up on this map. This is the Crescent Valley area and
21 the rail line. Down to the southeast, this is the Diamond
22 Valley agricultural district. Some of the most high
23 nutrient, high quality Timothy and alfalfa hay comes out of
24 Eureka County right here. And, although the corridor was
25 proposed to be over here, even the Diamond Valley farmers had

1 great concern of what happens if something happens up here,
2 just the national attitude towards that, their opinion of,
3 you know, you had a nuclear accident in your county, they
4 were afraid that that could ultimately impact their ability
5 to market their product, which does not stay here in Nevada.
6 The majority of this product goes out of the state, even out
7 of the country.

8 So, even though they were miles away here from
9 Diamond Valley to the Crescent Valley area, they were still
10 concerned, and still is today. If this were to ever come to
11 pass and you did have some kind of rail accident, that
12 national exposure that would go with that could greatly
13 affect the economics of even the folks clear down here.

14 MS. JOHNSON: Michael, as assessor and working in
15 the Assessor's Office, you must have traveled around a lot in
16 the Crescent Valley area looking at different properties.

17 MR. MEARS: Yes.

18 MS. JOHNSON: Did you see any changes to properties
19 because of the nuclear, the potential of a nuclear rail line?

20 MR. MEARS: At least one in particular, yes. A
21 resident in the town of Crescent Valley decided that she
22 wanted to be able to watch the nuke train go by, so she had
23 her husband erect a substantial platform on their property so
24 she would have a viewing stand. Each time the train rolled
25 through the valley, she could go out there and watch it go

1 by. And, again, as we looked at the map, the proposed route
2 was running just about a mile and a quarter away from the
3 Town of Crescent Valley. So, she had a great view of where
4 it would pass right by the town site.

5 MS. JOHNSON: That's pretty close to the town, to
6 have a rail line be that close.

7 MR. MEARS: Definitely. And, again, you know, the
8 residents in the town site, there was great concern having it
9 that close, what that was going to mean to their property
10 values, but also a big concern was public health, and the
11 potential, although we were being told even in a train
12 derailment, there should not be radioactive spill, but just
13 the concept of radioactive waste moving through the Valley
14 just over a mile away from your house was quite alarming to a
15 lot of the residents in Crescent Valley. And, you know, they
16 were rightfully concerned.

17 MS. JOHNSON: Understood. The County, through the
18 Nuclear Waste Program, hired some technical experts to
19 analyze various aspects of the proposed rail corridor and how
20 it could affect the Eureka County and the Crescent Valley
21 area. I know that you provided some support to those
22 consultants as they were working on comments to the
23 Environmental Impact Statement, and also to the County's
24 Impact Assessment Report. Can you talk a little bit about
25 the support that you gave?

1 MR. MEARS: Sure. We were talking earlier about
2 the baseline data that we looked to create. Once we acquired
3 are parcel database and had a database that we were going to
4 be able to keep current, we set out on establishing very good
5 road centerline data. We actually purchased a GPS unit and
6 physically went out and drove all of the roads in Eureka
7 County, so we had the best road data available to us.

8 At the same time, I was going out to agencies that
9 already had some GIS capabilities, the Bureau of Land
10 Management, USGS, and I was getting any data that was out
11 there to add to what we had so that we had more analysis
12 capabilities.

13 When the County started doing some of the
14 preparation for the EIS and wanted to conduct different
15 studies, we had a fairly extensive database already in place
16 to assist those consultants in developing their analysis.
17 For example, we worked on some soils analysis for the
18 corridor. And, again, this is a similar picture of the area
19 we've been talking about with kind of the Crescent Valley
20 focus, the Town of Crescent Valley being right here,
21 Interstate 80 up to the north going west.

22 MS. JOHNSON: So, where would Elko be?

23 MR. MEARS: Elko would be off to the east. The
24 interstate is about another 12 miles to the north of Beowawe
25 here, and then Interstate 80 to the east takes you out to

1 Elko. If we want to pan to this map, actually this gives us
2 kind of a better overview. This is the entire County of
3 Eureka right here. The Town of Eureka where we are today is
4 right here. We go up about 90 miles to the northwest to the
5 Town of Crescent Valley, the small Town of Beowawe. We have
6 Battle Mountain out here on Interstate 80, the City of
7 Carlin, and then all the way out to the east here is the City
8 of Elko.

9 So, the area that a lot of these maps is focusing
10 on is this part right here from Beowawe down to the Town of
11 Crescent Valley. And, a lot of the reason for that is this
12 is where the proposed Carlin rail route was going to come off
13 the existing rail lines. The existing rail, you can see it
14 comes down through Elko, Carlin, runs down through Beowawe,
15 and then comes back up and out towards Battle Mountain. So,
16 a lot of our focus area was just right here in the actual
17 Crescent Valley area.

18 MS. JOHNSON: It looks like it plays tag with the
19 Humboldt River, too.

20 MR. MEARS: Most definitely. The Humboldt River
21 runs right along the rail, the existing rail at this time.
22 So, definitely. And, that was obviously another issue.

23 And, just one other thing I want to point out here
24 is Eureka County is a very large county. This represents
25 4200 square miles of land area. And, you know, again, we've

1 got rail through here, interstate, Humboldt River, heavy
2 parceled area, some population, and what-not. And, to put
3 all of Eureka County into perspective with the project as a
4 whole, Eureka County sits here on the State of Nevada map.
5 The proposed corridor that we were doing, and continue to do
6 analysis on is this orange line here, ultimately traveling
7 down past Tonopah and along the Nellis Air Force Base, to the
8 actual Yucca Mountain site, which is down here in Southern
9 Nevada.

10 So, over here on this other map, was where we
11 started doing some of the hydro-analysis, and where we
12 started as far as dealing with water issues was we wanted to
13 see--we knew there was a flood zone in the Crescent Valley
14 area. We wanted to be able to identify that, so we took the
15 existing FEMA flood zone maps that we had in our Public Works
16 Office, and we digitized those, and then we were able to
17 overlay the 100 year flood plane on the Crescent Valley area
18 to discover exactly what many of us had suspected. This rail
19 line was going to run right through the middle of the flood
20 zone. Obviously, that prompted some concerns, so we
21 continued working with different consultants to do additional
22 analysis of water flows through this basin and what-not, and
23 ultimately made recommendations that if this rail line were
24 to come through the Crescent Valley area, the rail bed was
25 going to have to be elevated substantially in order to not

1 cause issues with water flow if there was to be an incident.

2 So, again, the soils analysis, we did a lot of
3 different water analysis, and we provided a lot of data to
4 the different consultants who either took our data and
5 manipulated it and created their own products, or a lot of
6 times what they would do is they would work with their data,
7 then submit it to myself, and I would create the visual
8 products that we would then use in different documents, or
9 for display. But, I was very involved with, again,
10 transferring data back and forth between consultants and
11 myself to try to get as much information as we could put
12 together, so that we were answering all of the questions that
13 were being raised for the Carlin corridor in Eureka County.

14 MS. JOHNSON: It's ironic that they basically
15 selected the five different corridors that they were
16 studying, but they hadn't done the kind of level of detailed
17 analysis that you might think would be appropriate before you
18 would select a corridor as being appropriate. Does that make
19 sense?

20 MR. MEARS: Yes.

21 MS. JOHNSON: We were essentially, I think, doing a
22 lot of the work that the federal agency should have done in
23 order to even put that line on the map in the first place.

24 MR. MEARS: And, I agree. Again, when I came to
25 work in Eureka County, we were still utilizing what I call

1 the Crayola Information System. That was paper maps, and
2 magic markers, and everybody scribbling on them and trying to
3 make decisions with that.

4 What the County really needed was this mapping
5 capability. We needed to be able to do that kind of deep
6 detailed analysis that wasn't being done, and we needed to do
7 that for the protection of the County, protection of its
8 citizens, protection of its resources. And, so, that's why
9 I've always been very impressed with Eureka County's
10 ambitious approach to developing a GIS mapping system, even
11 when they didn't know what it was capable of doing, and they
12 honestly weren't really, they had some vision, but they
13 really didn't understand the full dynamics of a full-blown
14 GIS and what it could do. We quickly found out when we
15 started establishing this data, and I started producing some
16 of the analysis products that we even have here, just how
17 great a tool an effective GIS is.

18 And, you know, I'm certain that a lot of our data
19 created right out of Eureka County was used at the federal
20 level to ultimately make decisions on whether this was an
21 appropriate corridor for the rail line.

22 MS. JOHNSON: Michael, I know that over the course
23 of the time that we've been involved in the Yucca Mountain
24 project, that the County has sponsored several tours to go
25 down to Yucca Mountain and take a look at the site. Did you

1 go on one of those tours?

2 MR. MEARS: I have been on several, actually.

3 MS. JOHNSON: Can you tell me a little bit about
4 that?

5 MR. MEARS: Sure. I can't recall when my first
6 trip to the mountain was. What I do remember about it is we
7 went deep into the tunnel, clear down to areas where they
8 were doing testing and monitoring and the scientists were
9 there and were quite busy and showing us the development and
10 what had been done and what they were testing, and I remember
11 thinking to myself at that time this is not a place that
12 they're testing. It's ready to accept waste. And, I think
13 we'd better get on the stick here if we're going to be able
14 to show impacts.

15 And, there was a great urgency after that first
16 tour, that, you know, we really need to be pro-active because
17 this, at that time, the Carlin route was one of the primary
18 route considerations, and, you know, I was just--I was
19 greatly impacted by that first visit at just how much had
20 been done, the magnitude of what had been, the drill machine
21 was quite impressive. But, everything that was going on
22 underground led me to believe that this was going to happen.
23 It was just a matter of when it would happen. And, again,
24 that just created a greater sense of urgency on my part that
25 we needed to start really preparing Eureka County and its

1 residents for the potential impact that might be coming.

2 In subsequent visits, I found it very interesting
3 that the furthest we would go is the initial staging area.
4 We suddenly were not allowed to see the rest of the facility
5 any longer. And, we didn't get taken to the other side of
6 the mountain where they had exited and the drill machine sat,
7 and I found that kind of interesting, that we were suddenly--
8 we had been in the depths of this facility, and were now
9 isolated to just this one little area to kind of get that
10 overview that was pretty much the same visit after visit.

11 MS. JOHNSON: The PR talk?

12 MR. MEARS: The PR talk.

13 MS. JOHNSON: Yes.

14 MR. MEARS: Correct. So, you know, following that
15 visit, I think we did ramp up our efforts to really start
16 utilizing the tools that we had, and acquiring what other
17 tools we thought we needed, whether it was consultants or
18 creating additional data, but I think we recognized that
19 there truly was something going on here, and it was on a very
20 grand scale, and we needed to be prepared to defend ourselves
21 if we didn't want that corridor coming through Eureka County.

22 MS. JOHNSON: Michael, in the time that you've been
23 in Eureka, how have you seen attitudes about the Yucca
24 Mountain project change?

25 MR. MEARS: The project itself has a lot of

1 differing opinions. There are people in the County that feel
2 like it would be a good thing for the State of Nevada, a
3 good, potentially a good money-maker off the Federal
4 Government, and what else are you going to do with that land
5 down there. And, of course, you have the other side that
6 says we don't want the nation's nuclear waste in our
7 backyard, and then there's actually quite a number of people
8 that I know that are kind of caught in the middle of which
9 way they feel. And, that kind of changes with different
10 dynamics.

11 Obviously, the people in the Crescent Valley area
12 and in the north end are going to be the most immediately
13 impacted if this rail corridor came through, and they were
14 alarmed. Again, as I stated earlier, some were hoping to
15 capitalized, but the large majority of the folks that are
16 living there right now want to live there, and were not
17 necessarily comfortable with a nuclear train passing by just
18 a mile outside of their town.

19 You know, we've shifted gears today from where we
20 were back in, say, '99, where we were talking about it pretty
21 much all the time. It was on our Commission agenda every
22 meeting, and the County officials were always addressing, you
23 know, the different analysis we needed to do, what we were
24 going to do to protect Eureka County's interests. So, it was
25 a daily conversation.

1 Today, we don't talk about it quite so much. It's
2 still on our radar. We still consider it. We still have
3 discussions about it because we know it hasn't totally been
4 resolved as to whether Yucca Mountain will ultimately be
5 utilized, and will they utilize rail to get the waste to it,
6 so we have to keep it on our radar and make sure that we are
7 doing our due diligence as a County to be prepared if it
8 comes to pass that Yucca Mountain becomes a usable
9 repository.

10 But, as far as people's opinions, I don't think
11 it's on as many people's radar, public radar as it is for
12 those of us involved in the County Government. You know, a
13 few years ago, we had a young gentleman here in Eureka that
14 died of leukemia. That brought up a lot of concerns at that
15 time of, you know, what could this mean having nuclear waste
16 passing through. You know, we do have down-winders that live
17 here in Eureka that remember the days of nuclear testing in
18 that area. They have a very different opinion of what--and
19 some of them even differ in their own opinions. Some say the
20 ground is already wasted, why not use it. And, others
21 remember the tests that went on and seeing cancer become a
22 prominent killer for a lot of those people. They have a very
23 strong opinion about whether they want nuclear waste in the
24 State of Nevada or not.

25 So, you know, the dynamics change kind of based on

1 where you come from and your experience in the State of
2 Nevada, and what you've lived through as to whether you're a
3 real proponent or not.

4 (Whereupon, the interview was concluded.)

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