INTERVIEW OF MICHAEL MEARS

BY ABBY JOHNSON

EUREKA COUNTY, NEVADA
YUCCA MOUNTAIN LESSONS LEARNED PROJECT

held in

EUREKA CITY, NEVADA
MS. CLANCY: We’re in Eureka County, in the Town of Eureka. We’re interviewing Michael Mears for the Yucca Mountain Project Lessons Learned. And, interviewing today is Abby Johnson.

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

When did you start working for the County?

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

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

MR. MEARS: That is correct.

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

MR. MEARS: I did. Actually, I was initially hired as a GIS technician to come in. The County had done some work prior to my hire to develop a GIS system, but it had essentially stalled out. So, the first several months that I was employed with Eureka County, I was analyzing what data we had acquired, what software we had available, and then I made some recommendations to the County as to where we needed to go from there to have a truly functional GIS program in the
MS. JOHNSON: I think that one of the most useful things that you were able to do was to build a live baseline data that we needed to analyze. Can you talk a little bit about the kinds of baseline data that you, the layers of the GIS that you developed?

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

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

This is basically, this is where the original rail line runs, and this is where the Yucca Mountain corridor--the
Carlin corridor was proposed to come off. Basically, the yellow and the green, this magenta color, all of that is private landownership, and it’s a checker board because of the rail property that exists in the north end of Eureka County. But, what we’ve discovered is we’re impacting a lot of private land where this rail runs.

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

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

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

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

MS. JOHNSON: A two for one special?

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

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

At this point today, Crescent Valley has roughly 200 people in the town site, and the surrounding area probably another 100. So, the Valley is not as populated as the parcel density would make one think. But, a big part of that, too, is the utility development hasn’t taken place in
the Valley that I think was originally speculated as well. The power grid has not expanded away from the town site. Right now, it’s all basically domestic wells and septic systems as far as water and sewage. So, it never really exploded in the way that I think the original developers and speculators thought that it might. But, it did create a great amount of parcel density.

MS. JOHNSON: And, many individual owners.

MR. MEARS: Many.

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

MR. MEARS: Again, when we did this analysis and you see that parcel density, almost every one of those parcels has an individual owner, and most of them are not necessarily living on that parcel. They’re absent owners. A lot of these parcels sold again in the early Seventies, and it was an opportunity—this was marketed nationally at the time. So, people from all over the country had an opportunity to buy a piece of ground in an unchartered area of Nevada. So, yeah, there’s still today a lot of owners,
and they are spread out all over, I mean even globally at this point.

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

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

MS. JOHNSON: Let’s move onto the next question.
So, I understand that there was actually lakefront property in Crescent Valley. Can you talk about that a little bit?

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

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

MS. JOHNSON: Obviously sight unseen?

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

When this whole rail corridor thing was being discussed, and it’s, you know, all through the process, and even today still, I will get calls of people wanting to know
when the nuclear waste is coming through Crescent Valley. A lot of people had mixed feelings. Some of these absent landowners actually figured they were going to make some good money on their property if the rail line passed by it. Others were greatly afraid that they weren’t going to be able to come out here and build a retirement home at some point because the rail line was going to be there.

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

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

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

MR. MEARS: Certainly. I think I would start that conversation, and again I keep referring to this same map, but, you know, our initial--some of the initial conversations that were held, especially at Crescent Valley Town Hall
meetings, were concerns about what happens with this coming through the Valley. You know, and as I just said a moment ago, there were two sides. Some people were hoping to capitalize on the government needing their ground and they would pay a premium to buy their ground to run this rail line through, but those that were already living here, or had aspirations of building out here, were greatly feared of what might happen if there was a nuclear rail line coming through, the potential of some sort of accident taking place, and what that could ultimately do to the impacts. And, I think we heard more from those people that were fearing the decline in property values and what might happen just on a public safety level.

The other part of this is you’ve got a great amount of agricultural land, all this green is agricultural ranch land. Down in the south area here, there’s a number of alfalfa pivots that are producing high quality alfalfa hay. And, not on this map, but to the southeast, I can kind of show it here, this is where--this is the area that we have blown up on this map. This is the Crescent Valley area and the rail line. Down to the southeast, this is the Diamond Valley agricultural district. Some of the most high nutrient, high quality Timothy and alfalfa hay comes out of Eureka County right here. And, although the corridor was proposed to be over here, even the Diamond Valley farmers had
great concern of what happens if something happens up here, just the national attitude towards that, their opinion of, you know, you had a nuclear accident in your county, they were afraid that that could ultimately impact their ability to market their product, which does not stay here in Nevada. The majority of this product goes out of the state, even out of the country.

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

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

MR. MEARS: Yes.

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

MR. MEARS: At least one in particular, yes. A resident in the town of Crescent Valley decided that she wanted to be able to watch the nuke train go by, so she had her husband erect a substantial platform on their property so she would have a viewing stand. Each time the train rolled through the valley, she could go out there and watch it go
by. And, again, as we looked at the map, the proposed route was running just about a mile and a quarter away from the Town of Crescent Valley. So, she had a great view of where it would pass right by the town site.

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

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

MS. JOHNSON: Understood. The County, through the Nuclear Waste Program, hired some technical experts to analyze various aspects of the proposed rail corridor and how it could affect the Eureka County and the Crescent Valley area. I know that you provided some support to those consultants as they were working on comments to the Environmental Impact Statement, and also to the County’s Impact Assessment Report. Can you talk a little bit about the support that you gave?
MR. MEARS: Sure. We were talking earlier about the baseline data that we looked to create. Once we acquired are parcel database and had a database that we were going to be able to keep current, we set out on establishing very good road centerline data. We actually purchased a GPS unit and physically went out and drove all of the roads in Eureka County, so we had the best road data available to us. At the same time, I was going out to agencies that already had some GIS capabilities, the Bureau of Land Management, USGS, and I was getting any data that was out there to add to what we had so that we had more analysis capabilities.

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

MS. JOHNSON: So, where would Elko be?

MR. MEARS: Elko would be off to the east. The interstate is about another 12 miles to the north of Beowawe here, and then Interstate 80 to the east takes you out to
Elko. If we want to pan to this map, actually this gives us kind of a better overview. This is the entire County of Eureka right here. The Town of Eureka where we are today is right here. We go up about 90 miles to the northwest to the Town of Crescent Valley, the small Town of Beowawe. We have Battle Mountain out here on Interstate 80, the City of Carlin, and then all the way out to the east here is the City of Elko.

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

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

MR. MEARS: Most definitely. The Humboldt River runs right along the rail, the existing rail at this time. So, definitely. And, that was obviously another issue. And, just one other thing I want to point out here is Eureka County is a very large county. This represents 4200 square miles of land area. And, you know, again, we’ve
got rail through here, interstate, Humboldt River, heavy
parceled area, some population, and what-not. And, to put
all of Eureka County into perspective with the project as a
whole, Eureka County sits here on the State of Nevada map.
The proposed corridor that we were doing, and continue to do
analysis on is this orange line here, ultimately traveling
down past Tonopah and along the Nellis Air Force Base, to the
actual Yucca Mountain site, which is down here in Southern
Nevada.

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

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

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

MR. MEARS: Yes.

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

MR. MEARS: And, I agree. Again, when I came to
work in Eureka County, we were still utilizing what I call
the Crayola Information System. That was paper maps, and
magic markers, and everybody scribbling on them and trying to
make decisions with that.

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

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

MS. JOHNSON: Michael, I know that over the course
of the time that we’ve been involved in the Yucca Mountain
project, that the County has sponsored several tours to go
down to Yucca Mountain and take a look at the site. Did you
go on one of those tours?

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

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

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

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

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

MS. JOHNSON: The PR talk?

MR. MEARS: The PR talk.

MS. JOHNSON: Yes.

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

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

MR. MEARS: The project itself has a lot of
differing opinions. There are people in the County that feel like it would be a good thing for the State of Nevada, a good, potentially a good money-maker off the Federal Government, and what else are you going to do with that land down there. And, of course, you have the other side that says we don’t want the nation’s nuclear waste in our backyard, and then there’s actually quite a number of people that I know that are kind of caught in the middle of which way they feel. And, that kind of changes with different dynamics.

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

You know, we’ve shifted gears today from where we were back in, say, ’99, where we were talking about it pretty much all the time. It was on our Commission agenda every meeting, and the County officials were always addressing, you know, the different analysis we needed to do, what we were going to do to protect Eureka County’s interests. So, it was a daily conversation.
Today, we don’t talk about it quite so much. It’s still on our radar. We still consider it. We still have discussions about it because we know it hasn’t totally been resolved as to whether Yucca Mountain will ultimately be utilized, and will they utilize rail to get the waste to it, so we have to keep it on our radar and make sure that we are doing our due diligence as a County to be prepared if it comes to pass that Yucca Mountain becomes a usable repository.

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

So, you know, the dynamics change kind of based on
where you come from and your experience in the State of Nevada, and what you’ve lived through as to whether you’re a real proponent or not.

(Whereupon, the interview was concluded.)
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 this matter.

Dated at Aurora, Colorado, this 24th day of April, 2011.

s/ Mary Chevalier

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