



Connecting with Our Community in 2026

A Message from the Director

The Energy Technology Engineering Center (ETEC) team has had a busy start to 2026.



Photo courtesy of Josh Mengers.

We launched the new Community Outreach, Neighbor Notifications, Engagement, Collaboration and Training (CONNECT) series with the inaugural session on January 28. The first informal meeting drew nearly 40 community members from a wide variety of groups – including representatives from elected officials’ offices, school and park districts, business groups, cleanup advocates and individuals who were curious about DOE’s cleanup activities at the Santa Susana Field Laboratory (SSFL) (see story on page 2). These discussions are essential as we continue with key site preparation activities and plan for future cleanup.

Thank you to everyone who was able to attend. We appreciate you taking the time out of your schedules to engage with us and have open conversations about the cleanup. The valuable input you shared with us helps to shape our plans for next CONNECT session and continue the dialogue about our progress at SSFL.

I also want to welcome Jesleen Abarca to the ETEC team as our new executive assistant. She joined in January and is eager to learn about the site and the work we are doing (see story below).

As we round out the first quarter of 2026, the ETEC team is continuing to find opportunities to engage with our neighbors. We will be at the Simi Valley Street Fair in May (see story on page 7) and are already working on plans for the next CONNECT session, tentatively scheduled for May.

We hope you will continue to engage with us, whether by attending our next CONNECT session, stopping by our booth at the Street Fair, or sending us an email.

Sincerely,

Dr. Josh Mengers

In this issue of *CleanUpdate*:

- Meet ETEC’s new team member
- New CONNECT series launches
- Building demolition work update
- Learn about the datura flower
- The Science of Color: Yellow stands for safety
- Visit ETEC at the street fair in May



Meet the
ETEC Site Team



Jesleen Abarca Executive Assistant II

Jesleen joined DOE ETEC in January 2026. Prior to joining the team, she coordinated maintenance projects, processed billing and set up contracts for a telecommunications company that supported various federal agencies, with a focus on Air Force bases and Secret Service tower/emergency equipment sites. In her free time, Jesleen enjoys working out, hiking with her husband and their 2-year-old dog, Beau, trying new restaurants and relaxing at home watching new shows.

Let's CONNECT!

ETEC's new series aims to *CONNECT* with community on cleanup

By Melissa Simon

In-person engagement and direct conversations with those invested in cleanup at the Santa Susana Field Laboratory (SSFL) were core concepts of the new series launched last month by the U.S. Department of Energy's (DOE) Energy Technology Engineering Center (ETEC) team.

Nearly 40 people attended the first session in the Community Outreach, Neighbor Notifications, Engagement, Collaboration, and Training (CONNECT) series to hear updates on cleanup activities at SSFL.

SSFL is a 2,850-acre former rocket engine and nuclear research facility comprised of four operational areas. DOE's Office of Environmental Management (EM) is charged with remediation in Area IV, where ETEC previously operated.

"The CONNECT series is our commitment to action, partnership and open communication," said Josh Mengers, EM's federal project director for ETEC. "The purpose of this series is simple — to strengthen relationships with the people and organizations who care about the site's cleanup, and to increase the way we provide direct, timely information about the cleanup."

Attendees at the January CONNECT session included representatives from state and local elected officials' offices, school and park districts, neighborhood councils, conservancy groups, a Native American tribe and longtime cleanup advocates.



Josh Mengers, DOE's federal project director for SSFL, interacts with attendees at the launch of ETEC's CONNECT series on January 28, 2026. Photo courtesy of Melissa Simon.

Mengers and Luke Hill, a project manager with EM contractor North Wind, gave the same presentation twice during the nearly four-hour CONNECT session, which was designed as an informal meeting to allow people to attend the portion that best fit their schedule.

The inaugural meeting provided a forum for key project updates, including plans for continuing building demolition and an update on groundwater remediation progress.

The group then engaged in Q&A with staff about groundwater, building demolition, technical data and potential topics for future events. Attendees were also encouraged to submit feedback about the session and share ideas for future events. The feedback will be used in upcoming events.

The ETEC team will host periodic CONNECT sessions, each focused on a specific topic, to provide the public with information and opportunities to engage with staff. Meetings will be held in the ETEC office (see map on page 7).



Luke Hill, a project manager at SSFL for DOE's contractor North Wind, presents an update on cleanup progress at ETEC's inaugural CONNECT session on January 28, 2026. Photo courtesy of Melissa Simon.

"My hope is that getting to know each other better will help us work more productively as partners towards a cleanup at SSFL that's safe, scientifically sound and protective of this unique site," Mengers said.

Visit the [CONNECT Series page](#)¹ to view the Jan. 28 presentation and learn about upcoming session dates or topics. To suggest future topics or provide feedback, fill out the [CONNECT Feedback Form](#)².

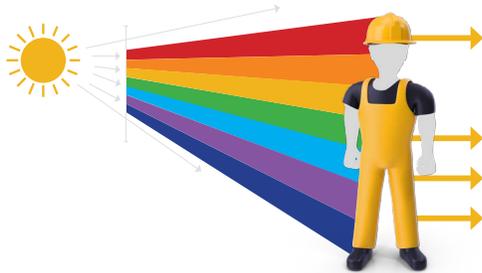




DIY Yellow For SAFETY

THE SCIENCE OF COLOR

The U.S. Department of Energy Office of Legacy Management is committed to safety. Colors not only help us find our favorite shirt hanging in a closet or juicy bites of foods on our dinner plate, but colors keep us safe from dangerous objects, help identify workers in a work zone, and communicate important information.



How do our eyes perceive color?

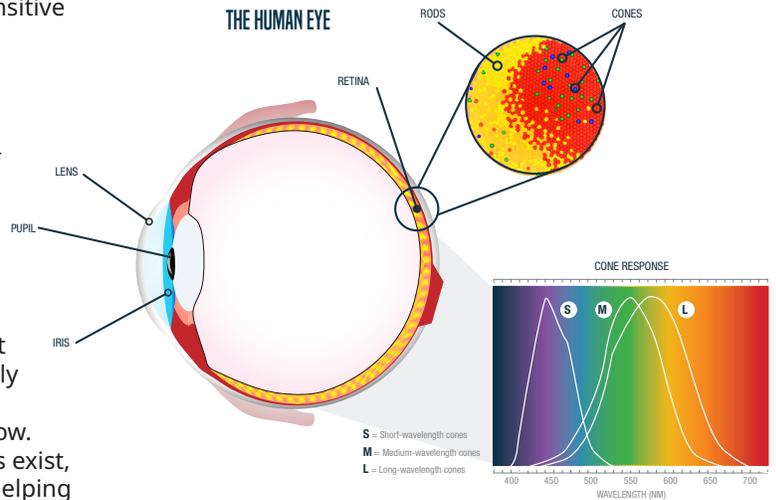
When you see a red apple or a yellow shirt, the color you see is being reflected back, while all other colors are being absorbed. Natural light — also known as “white light” — includes all the colors of the rainbow: red, orange, yellow, green, blue, indigo, and violet.

Why is yellow used for safety?

Our eyes are able to see colors because of **photoreceptors**, which are special sense organs located in the **retina**, the light-sensitive area at the back of the eye.

These photoreceptors are either **rods** or **cones**. Rods are generally concentrated around the exterior of the retina. Rods are responsible for dim light and respond well to movement, but not color. Generally located in the center of the retina, cones are responsible for processing brighter light and perceiving colors reflected by objects. There are also three types of cones, each specializing in perceiving red, green, and blue colors.

Yellow invokes a response by two of the three cones. When you see yellow, more of your eye is able to see and transmit the image to your brain — therefore, making you more likely to see and notice the object versus red or blue. Even some individuals who experience colorblindness can identify yellow. While varying degrees and different types of colorblindness exist, yellow is easier to perceive in comparison to other colors, helping more people stay safe.



Cut this page out for coloring activity on the back

Compare different colors of safety. Which Worker do you see the best?



What happens when you...

1

Move this image into bright and dim lighting. What do you notice?

2

Look away so you can only see the workers in your peripheral vision. What color stands out the most?

Make your own rainbow!

Another way to learn about light is through rainbows. We've already learned that natural light contains all the colors of a rainbow. One way to see all of these colors is **refraction**, the process of light passing through an object causing colors to separate at different speeds. Explore refraction by shining natural light through these objects:

Prism

- 1 Cut a narrow slit in a white piece of cardboard.
- 2 Shine sunlight through the slit onto a black piece of cardboard, creating a thin beam of light.
- 3 Place a prism over the light.
- 4 Rotate the prism until you see the full Spectrum of colors.

Glass of Water

- 1 Cut a small slit in the middle of a piece of paper.
- 2 Tape the paper onto the side of a smooth, clear glass of water, so the sunshine can pass through the cut and appear on the surface of the water.
- 3 Place the glass on top of a white surface (e.g., white tile, paper).
- 4 A small rainbow should appear below the glass.

Hose

- 1 Grab a hose and turn on the water.
- 2 Stand in a spot in your yard with the sun behind you.
- 3 Place your thumb over the hose nozzle, creating a misting spray with the water.
- 4 Holding the hose in front of you, watch for a rainbow to appear above the water.

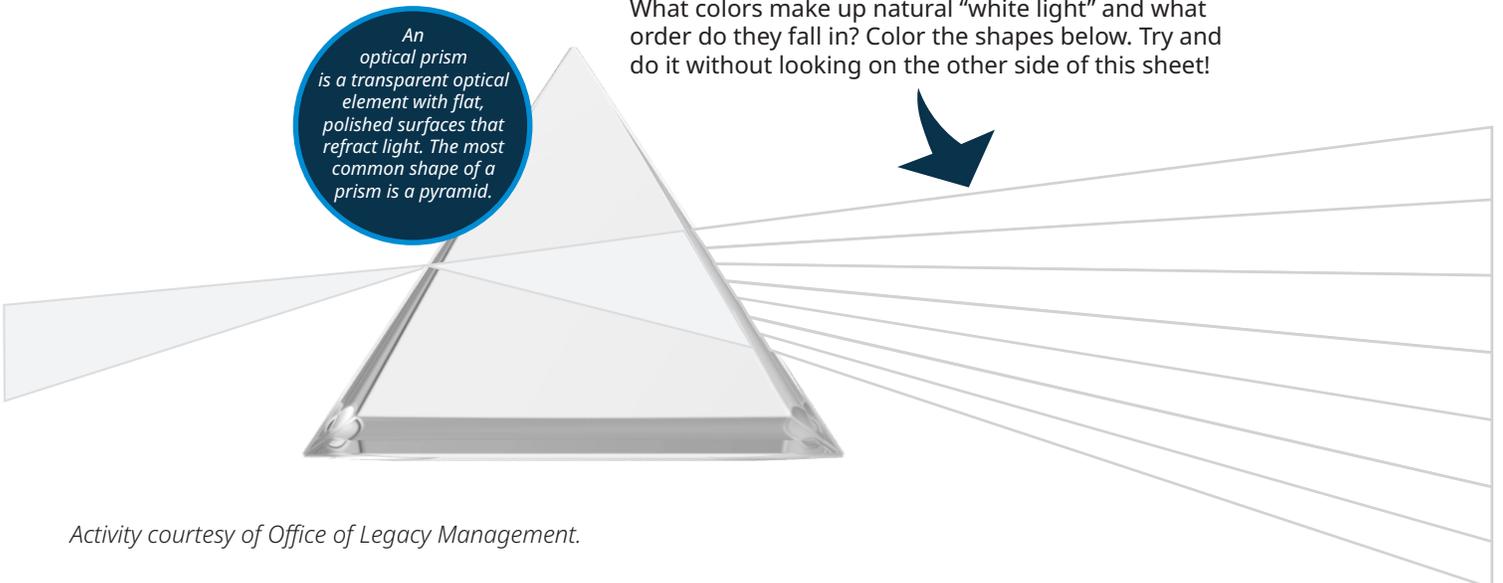
Mirror

- 1 Prop up a mirror inside a glass container (e.g., a fishbowl, a pitcher).
- 2 Fill the container until the mirror is halfway submerged.
- 3 Place the container near a window with direct sunlight.
- 4 Reflect the light off the mirror onto a white piece of paper.
- 5 Move the piece of paper until you see the colors.

Color Quiz!

What colors make up natural "white light" and what order do they fall in? Color the shapes below. Try and do it without looking on the other side of this sheet!

An optical prism is a transparent optical element with flat, polished surfaces that refract light. The most common shape of a prism is a pyramid.



Activity courtesy of Office of Legacy Management.

DOE shifts focus of building demo at SSFL to basement, vaults and slabs

By Melissa Simon

Area IV at the Santa Susana Field Laboratory (SSFL) used to house more than 270 numbered structures, but now all that remains is one basement, two vaults and several concrete slabs.

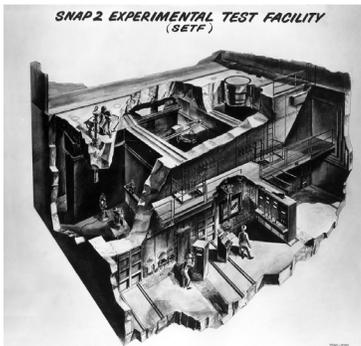
Following the demolition of the final 18 above-ground buildings in 2020 and 2021, the U.S. Department of Energy (DOE) shifted its focus to removing these remaining underground structures.

“We’ve made significant progress on building demolition. Our next major step is to demolish the last remaining basement . . . known as Building 4024,” said Josh Mengers, DOE’s federal project director, at the inaugural session of the new Community Outreach, Neighbor Notifications, Engagement, Collaboration and Training (CONNECT) series (see story on page 2).

The basement of Building 4024, which extends about 35 feet below ground, was used in the research, development and testing of small nuclear reactors in a simulated space environment as part of the [Systems for Nuclear Auxiliary Power \(SNAP\) program](#)³.



Josh Mengers, DOE’s federal project director for SSFL, (right) and Luke Hill, a project manager at SSFL for DOE’s contractor North Wind, (left) give a presentation during ETEC’s inaugural CONNECT session on January 28, 2026. Photo courtesy of Melissa Simon.



The SNAP Environmental Test Facility, also known as Building 4024, had large vacuum chambers that replicated the near-zero pressure of space and were equipped with thermal shrouds and radiant heaters to simulate thermal extremes encountered in orbit. This allowed for the system-level testing of three fully assembled SNAP reactor prototypes, including SNAP-10. Photo courtesy of DOE.

Demolishing the basement, also known as the SNAP Environmental Test Facility, is just one part of DOE’s ongoing cleanup at the 2,850-acre SSFL, where it previously conducted nuclear energy and liquid metals research at the Energy Technology and Engineering Center (ETEC) in Area IV.

In 2025, DOE developed a work plan for the basement’s demolition outlining the proposed procedures and approach for removing the underground facility.

“Currently, we’re tracking to begin demolition of this basement in late 2027,” said Luke Hill, project manager with DOE contractor North Wind.

Several other plans have been created to support the demolition work, including a site monitoring and mitigation plan that provide guidelines to protect biological and cultural resources, manage soil and excavated rock, mitigate dust and monitor air quality.

Other plans detail protocols for waste management and transportation, stormwater pollution prevention and a data gap investigation.

“We need to understand the subsurface around the building to help us with critical decisions and demolition approach,” Hill said.

DOE will work with the California Department of Toxic Substances Control (DTSC) on the review and approval for all plans, Hill said. DTSC is the state agency overseeing cleanup at SSFL.

Area IV Building Demolition: By the Numbers

3 Subsurface structures remaining (1 basement, 2 vaults)

270+ Former structures in Area IV

18 Final above-ground buildings demolished in 2020-2021

35ft The depth of the Building 4024 basement

2027 The target year to begin demolition of the final basement





Spotted at SSFL!

Jimsonweed

Nestled in the hills near Simi Valley, the Santa Susana Field Laboratory (SSFL) is home to numerous species of plants and animals, including the beautiful yet deadly jimsonweed (*Datura wrightii*), one of five species of the datura known to grow in California.

Did You Know?

Jimsonweed is the only species of datura that inhabits SSFL. The flower blooms from February to October.

Why it's special: Jimsonweed is native to California, across the southwestern U.S. and in northwestern Mexico. This particular species is not listed as endangered or sensitive.

Typical habitat: The jimsonweed grows in shrublands and grasslands. At SSFL, the flower is found in coastal sage scrub and grassland habitats, which are present in several places across Area IV.

Fun facts:

- Jimsonweed has large, white, showy, fragrant trumpet-shaped flowers and a highly spiny seed pod. The flowers bloom at night and are pollinated by hawk moths.
- An herbaceous perennial, jimsonweed grows in a sprawling pattern that can reach between 3 and 6 feet wide and between 2 to 5 feet tall. The striking white trumpet flowers can grow up to 6 inches long and 4 inches across and sometimes might have a purple tint.
- In clear weather, flowers open in the morning and evening, and close during the heat of the day, depending on water availability. They may open earlier during cloudy weather.
- Beautiful but deadly – As part of the nightshade (Solanaceae) family, like potatoes and tomatoes, all parts of jimsonweed are highly poisonous and can be fatal to humans, pets and livestock due to its tropane alkaloids, which are naturally occurring compounds found in the Solanaceae family and are known for pharmacological effects and potential toxicity.
- High medicinal value – Known as *Toloache* to the Chumash, jimsonweed is an important medicinal plant used for spiritual purposes and is highly valued for its vision-inducing and painkilling properties.



Photos courtesy of Pam Hartman.

Information provided by Tara Schoenwetter, biologist at SSFL since 2011.





Meet us at the Street Fair!

By Melissa Simon

The Department of Energy (DOE) will be at the Simi Valley Street Fair on May 2 as part of the Energy Technology Engineering Center (ETEC) team's continued efforts to engage with the community.

Visit us to learn about DOE's work at the Santa Susana Field Laboratory (SSFL), learn about ETEC's new Community Outreach, Neighbor Notifications, Engagement, Collaboration and Training (CONNECT) series, and interact with staff.

We'll also have a fun DIY activity to create a spectroscope — a tool that separates white light into a rainbow of different colors based on wavelength — using everyday items, including a cardboard tube, cardstock paper, an old CD and tape. For a different type of spectroscope, there will be beads to make bracelets.

Read about [spectroscopes and get directions](#)⁴ to make your own instrument at home.



Noelle Saenz (left) participates in a hands-on science activity at DOE's booth during the May 2025 street fair. Also pictured is Josh Mengers, DOE's federal project director at SSFL. DOE will be at the street fair again on May 2, 2026. *Photo courtesy of Melissa Simon.*

Looking for DOE's ETEC office?

See the map on how to find us.

DOE ETEC Office
980 Enchanted Way, Suite 108
Simi Valley, CA 93065





Looking ahead



We want to hear from you! What questions do you have about the Santa Susana Field Lab? Tell us what you'd like to learn about wildlife, plants or other cleanup-related questions.

Email questions and comments to etec@emcbc.doe.gov.

Scan the QR code to read the *CleanUpdate* online.



A rabbit is seen near the trailer in Area IV where DOE contractors from North Wind work while onsite.
Photo courtesy of Alex Walters.



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