



A Message from the Director

Team, Neighbors, and Community Members,

The last few weeks have been a stark reminder of the power of nature and the constant threat of wildfire in our beautiful region. The smoke-filled skies, evacuations and school closures from the Sandy Fire were a source of fear and anxiety for thousands of our neighbors, and my thoughts are with everyone that was displaced or impacted.

In situations like this, readiness is paramount.

On behalf of the entire Department of Energy’s (DOE) team at the Energy Technology Engineering Center (ETEC), I want to extend my deepest gratitude to the heroic efforts of the first responders led by the Ventura County Fire Department. Their rapid response, skill and tireless efforts protected countless homes, successfully contained the fire before it crossed onto the Santa Susana Field Laboratory (SSFL) and kept all members of our community safe.



Fire crews staged equipment near SSFL during the Sandy Fire and successfully kept the blaze from crossing onto the site. *Photo courtesy of Josh Mengers.*

I also want to acknowledge DOE’s own national experts with the [Radiological Assistance Program \(RAP\)](#)¹, who were proactively deployed in coordination with our lead state regulator, the California Department of Toxic Substances Control, to provide additional air monitoring. While the fire thankfully did not reach SSFL, RAP’s readiness to assist is a testament to DOE’s commitment to providing the necessary resources to ensure public health and safety.

Our existing network of perimeter air monitors operated throughout the fire, and our team is now rigorously analyzing the data collected. This situation provides a valuable opportunity to reinforce the lessons learned from the much larger 2018 Woolsey Fire that burned across 80% of SSFL. An exhaustive, [multi-agency analysis](#)² found no releases of site-related contamination that posed a risk to the public. Our safety protocols are built on that real-world data. While any wildfire produces smoke and ash, we are confident our current analysis will reaffirm our primary mission: ensuring the safety of our team and our neighbors while we work to complete our cleanup mission.

We will continue to analyze the data from the Sandy Fire and plan to share more details at our next quarterly CONNECT meeting (see story on page 3). In the meantime, thank you again to our incredible firefighters and to our community for their resilience.

Sincerely,

Dr. Josh Mengers

In this issue of CleanUpdate:

- Safety, air monitoring top priorities during Sandy Fire
- CONNECT Series gives community a look at SSFL operations, cleanup
- ETEC team accelerates engagement efforts, site tours
- Learn about the mule deer
- Build a pool noodle rocket at home

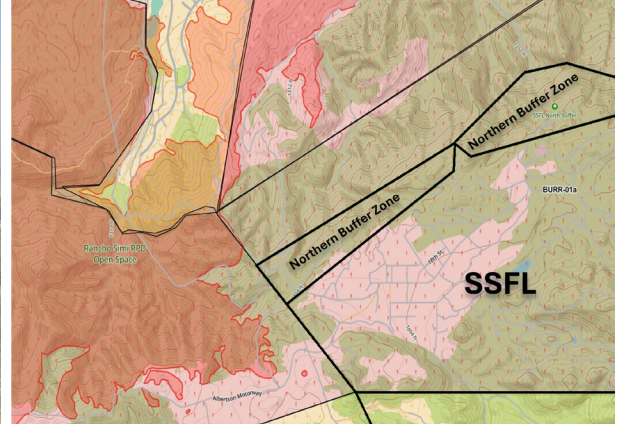


Safety protocols, air monitoring are top priorities during Sandy Fire

By Melissa Simon

The Sandy Fire quickly spread through the hills of Simi Valley last month, burning down one home and coming close to the boundary of the Santa Susana Field Laboratory (SSFL), where the Department of Energy (DOE) previously conducted liquid metals and nuclear energy research.

On the morning of May 18, DOE contractors noticed a plume of gray smoke just over a ridge near Area IV at the 2,850-acre former nuclear energy research and rocket engine testing facility, where the department operated the Energy Technology Engineering Center (ETEC) and is responsible for remediating remaining contamination.



The DOE team immediately initiated safety protocols and began monitoring the emerging Sandy Fire. All personnel were accounted for and safely left the site that afternoon.

Left image: A view of Area IV at SSFL on May 22, 2026, shows the site was untouched by the Sandy Fire, which burned near the site but never crossed onto it. *Photo courtesy of Josh Mengers.* Right image: A map of Sandy Fire's reach with an overlay of SSFL and the Northern Buffer Zone. *Map is courtesy of Watch Duty.*

SSFL remained closed through the weekend, as it was part of the evacuation orders issued by the Ventura County Fire Department.

Before departing the site, DOE ensured our existing network of [air monitors](#)³ was set up to continue collecting data, in coordination with our state regulators.

“We know the community has questions whenever a fire is close,” said Josh Mengers, DOE’s federal project director for SSFL. “Our priority is providing answers with the data collected from our air monitoring program.”

On May 22, once the fire was safely under control and no longer threatening SSFL, Mengers and some essential staff coordinated access to check on the site and gather the air monitoring data.

Fire crews had the Sandy Fire fully contained at 2,183 acres by May 27.

“We are immensely grateful to the incredible firefighters, whose tireless effort to establish and hold the fire break was exceptional, ensuring that the fire didn’t reach the site,” Mengers said.

Join the ETEC team for the next [Community Outreach, Neighbor Notifications, Engagement, Collaboration and Training \(CONNECT\)](#)⁴ Series community update tentatively scheduled for Aug. 12 to learn more about air monitoring data collected during the fire, response, safety protocols and lessons learned from the Woolsey Fire.

[View more photos](#)⁵ of SSFL during the Sandy Fire.



When the Sandy Fire broke out near SSFL, DOE workers immediately began monitoring the situation and prepared to follow safety protocols. *Photo courtesy of Josh Mengers.*



A DOE contractor changes out the filter in one of the perimeter air monitors during the Sandy Fire. *Photo courtesy of Josh Mengers.*



Community CONNECT looks at past, present, future of SSFL cleanup

By Melissa Simon

What cleanup has been done in Area IV at the Santa Susana Field Laboratory (SSFL)?

That was one of the main questions the U.S. Department of Energy (DOE) tackled at its recent Community Outreach, Neighbor Notifications, Engagement, Collaboration and Training (CONNECT) Series community update.

Josh Mengers, DOE's federal project director at SSFL, said much of the remediation has already been done in Area IV, where the department previously conducted liquid metals and nuclear energy research at the former Energy Technology Engineering Center (ETEC).

"We've been remediating Area IV for decades, even before . . . 1998 (when we finished all of our research at the site, (ending all operations) and we've been focused just on the remediation ever since," Mengers said during the meeting.

One example of completed cleanup is the [Sodium Reactor Experiment](#)⁶, which operated from 1957 to 1964 and was a pioneering nuclear power plant that is more well known for a July 1959 incident when 13 of its 34 fuel rods partially melted. It was successfully decontaminated and decommissioned from 1974 to 1983.

Another example is the [Former Sodium Disposal Facility](#)⁷, or sodium burn pit, that operated from 1956 to 1978 and was used to clean sodium from components before disposal. Interim soil remediation was conducted between 2000 and 2002 that removed all soil down to bedrock. Clean soil was then brought in and the area was revegetated.



Josh Mengers, DOE's federal project director at SSFL, talks about the EPA characterization study during the CONNECT Series community update on May 13, 2026. *Photo courtesy of Melissa Simon.*



Josh Mengers, DOE's federal project director at SSFL, interacts with the public during the CONNECT Series community update on May 13, 2026. *Photo courtesy of Melissa Simon.*

Numerous comprehensive studies have been conducted over the years.

In 2012, the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency published results from its radiological surveys of Area IV that identified the extent of contaminants remaining in soil, Mengers said. The results from these studies show that the previous remediations were successful.

"We're continuing our ongoing environmental monitoring (since) much of that (other remediation) work has already been completed and we're looking to . . . finish the job," Mengers said.

Ongoing work includes groundwater and air monitoring, a soils study to understand how to best revegetate the area after cleanup is done, and a groundwater treatment pilot study.

A recording of the May 13 presentation and slides are available on the [CONNECT Series page](#)⁸.

Join the ETEC team for the next CONNECT tentatively scheduled for Aug. 12 to learn more about the Sandy Fire (see story on page 2).

Check the [CONNECT Series page](#)⁸ for upcoming sessions or topics. To suggest future topics or provide feedback, fill out the [CONNECT feedback form](#)⁹.



3... 2... 1...

Lift-off!

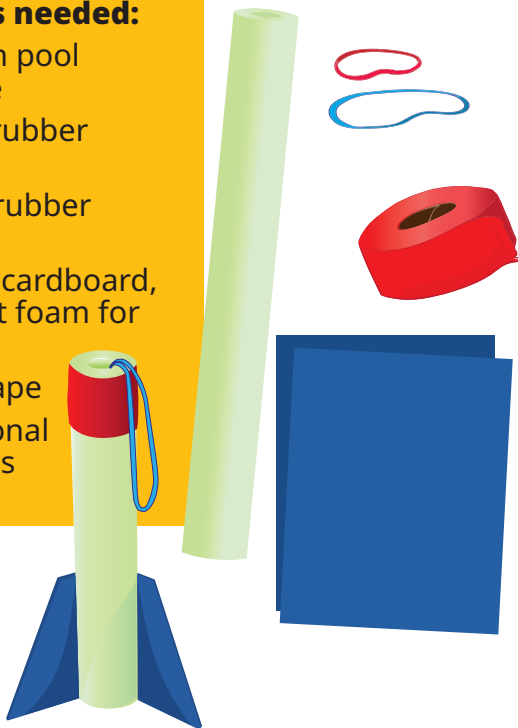
Engineer a Pool Noodle Rocket



Duration: 1 hour
Objective: To engineer a rocket to fly the farthest and fastest based on results and modifications.
NGSS Standard: K-PS2-2
Motion and Stability: Forces and interactions; analyze data to determine if a design solution works as intended to change the speed or direction of an object with a push or a pull.

Materials needed:

- 18-inch pool noodle
- Small rubber band
- Large rubber band
- Paper, cardboard, or craft foam for fins
- Duct tape
- Additional weights

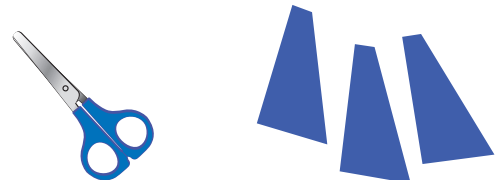


Instructions:

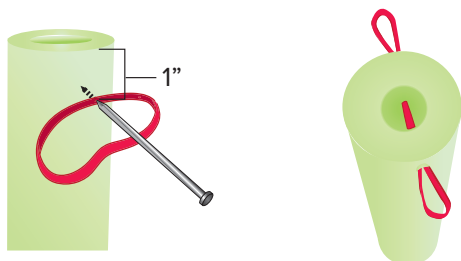
- 1 Optional: Ask an adult for help cutting the pool noodle. It shouldn't be shorter than 12 inches.



- 2 Recommended: Cut fins out of paper, cardboard, or craft foam. Tip: Try different sizes.



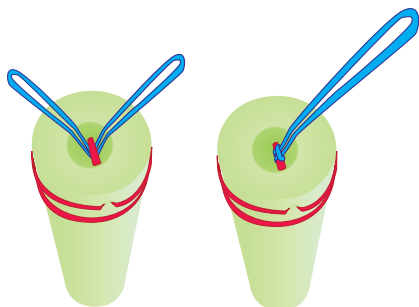
- 3** Ask an adult for help poking a hole one inch from the top of the pool noodle to thread the smaller rubber band through. The rubber band should stick out on both sides.



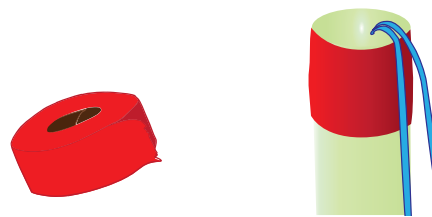
- 4** Loop each end of the rubber band around the pool noodle.



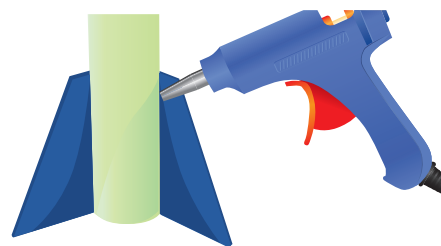
- 5** Loop the larger rubber band around the smaller rubber band inside the hole of the pool noodle. Pull one end of the large rubber band through the other end to knot it around the small rubber band.



- 6** Optional: Wrap duct tape around the top of the rocket to cover up the rubber band.



- 7** Recommended: Ask an adult for help securing the fins with either hot glue, tape, or by cutting fin slits at the bottom of the rocket.



- 8** Optional: Engineer and customize your rocket to achieve the fastest and farthest flight distance.

- 9** To launch the rocket, simply hold the bottom of your rocket in one hand and stretch the long rubber band in the other hand, aim, and let go!

STEM Challenge Questions:

1. Record your results: How far did your rocket travel? Did it fly straight? Can it fly high? Does it fly fast or slow?
2. What can you do to improve your results?
3. What caused the force or movement of your rocket? How could you change it?
4. Did you decorate your rocket in a special way?
5. Do lighter or heavier rockets fly farther? What modification could you do that would add to or lessen the weight?



energy.gov/lm/stem-lm



Spotted at SSFL!

Mule Deer

While many creatures inhabit the Santa Susana Field Laboratory (SSFL), the mule deer (*Odocoileus hemionus*) is the only deer species at the site nestled in the hills of eastern Ventura County, California. The native mule deer isn't currently endangered, but some populations have declined due to habitat loss, drought, wildfires, disease and barriers to migration.

Did You Know?

Why it's special: Mule deer get their name from their oversized mule-like ears that not only give them excellent hearing but also help dissipate body heat.

Typical habitat: Forest, woodland and brush habitats that are woody cover, meadows, shrubby openings and tree thickets.

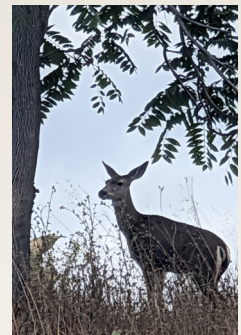
Food Source: As herbivorous ungulates, mule deer consume a variety of vegetation, including shrubs, grass, mushrooms, bark and acorns.

Fun facts:

- Mule deer have a grayish-brown to reddish-brown coat that becomes thicker and darker in the winter and lighter in the summer, a distinctive white rump and black-tipped tail.
- Males, known as bucks, typically weigh between 99 and 330 pounds, while females, known as does, are much smaller at 94 to 165 pounds.
- Many Native American tribes have used the mule deer as a source of food, clothing or tools. But the animal is also spiritually significant and has appeared in traditional stories, ceremonies and ecological practices.
- Mule deer live 8 to 10 years, with females generally living longer than males.
- Impressive antlers: Bucks grow branched antlers that are shed and regrown annually. The size and branching are influenced by genetics, nutrition, habitat quality and overall health.
- Bucks often have intense competitions, known as rut, by displaying their antlers and engaging in sparring matches to establish dominance. They also use vocalizations or scent marking to attract does.
- Mule deer breed from late October through December, with fawns typically born between May and June.
- Selective foragers: Mule deer tend to carefully choose the most nutritious parts of the plant, with most foraging happening at dawn and dusk.
- Mule deer are known to engage in geophagy, the intentional consumption of soil- or clay-rich mineral deposits. This behavior may provide essential minerals, aid digestion, help neutralize plant toxins, reduce stomach irritation and improve overall digestive efficiency.
- Leaps and bounds: Mule deer are excellent jumpers that can clear a fence up to 8 feet high or move 15 to 25 feet in a single bound. When alarmed, they perform a bouncing leap called stotting or pronking, where all four feet hit the ground at once to deter potential predators.



Photos courtesy of Alex Walters



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



ETEC team accelerates positive community engagement

By Melissa Simon

The Department of Energy’s (DOE) Energy Technology Engineering Center (ETEC) team boosted its recent engagement efforts with presentations to volunteer groups, participation in a local street fair, an interview with a TV news outlet, and hosting a handful of site tours at the Santa Susana Field Laboratory (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.

In March, ETEC staff attended the Chatsworth Community Coordinating Council, gave a presentation to the Simi Valley Kiwanis Club and did an on-air interview as part of a segment for a local TV news outlet.

In April and May, the team hosted site tours for members of the Ventura County Air Pollution Control District, DOE contractors and a local college student working on an audio documentary for a broadcast class.

Josh Mengers, DOE’s federal project director for ETEC, covered various topics during the site tours, including SSFL’s history, cleanup efforts, the air monitoring program, interim groundwater measures and the 1959 partial meltdown at the [Sodium Reactor Experiment](#)¹⁰.



Josh Mengers, DOE’s federal project director at SSFL, gave a presentation on the department’s cleanup activities at the site on March 25, 2026. Photo courtesy of Josh Mengers.

The ETEC team was among the hundreds of vendors at the [Simi Valley Street Fair](#)¹¹ in May, where visitors could learn about SSFL’s history and DOE’s cleanup or [create a spectroscope](#)¹², an instrument that separates white light into a rainbow of colors based on wavelengths.

At each of these events, the ETEC team highlighted the new [Community Outreach, Neighbor Notifications, Engagement, Collaboration and Training \(CONNECT\) Series](#)¹³ encouraged the public to attend the May 13 CONNECT meeting (see story on page 3) to learn more about DOE’s cleanup efforts at SSFL.

“We want to listen to the community, and engaging with them is important as we complete our portion of the cleanup,” Mengers said. “Attending events like this is a great way to do that and it also allows us to connect with different groups we may not have reached before.”

Community members talk with Josh Mengers (right), DOE’s federal project director at SSFL, and Lucas Ray (center), at the Simi Valley Street Fair on May 2, 2026. Photo courtesy of Melissa Simon.



Local college student Elizabeth Santana-Zavala interviewed Josh Mengers, DOE’s federal project director at SSFL, for a class project during a tour of SSFL on May 18, 2026. Photo courtesy of Melissa Simon.





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 bee prepares to land on a sage plant at SSFL. *Photo courtesy of Josh Mengers.*



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