

## Audio interview: Meet new interim Deputy Lab Director for Research Jeff Neaton

Season: 2, Episode 8

Host: John German

Guest: Jeff Neaton

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[00:00:09] **John German:** [00:00:00] Hi everyone. This is John German with Lawrence Berkeley National Laboratory's Strategic Communications Team. I'm here today with Jeff Neaton, who has just stepped into his role as Interim Deputy Lab Director for Research and Chief Research Officer.

Jeff, thank you for taking the time to share your insights with us.

[00:00:26] **Jeff Neaton:** Great to be here, John.

[00:00:27] **John German:** You've taken quite a journey here at the Lab from postdoc to staff scientist to Molecular Foundry director to ALD of the Lab's Energy Sciences Area.

Tell me a little bit about your career here and what it's been like for you personally.

[00:00:40] **Jeff Neaton:** Yeah, it's been an exciting one and I've really enjoyed every part of it.

I started here as a postdoc. I was looking for faculty positions, and I considered an offer at a university, and an offer from another national lab in the Bay Area.

And what ended up happening [00:01:00] was I got a call from Steven Louie who was part of the nascent Molecular Foundry, and he pitched the idea of the Molecular Foundry and it sounded really exciting, and it was the heyday of nanoscience.

And part of what was appealing was being at Berkeley and Berkeley Lab. It continues to have an incredible reputation. And part of it was just the ability to get in on the ground floor of what seemed to be a very exciting new center.

I was hired along with six other postdocs and got to work with Steven Louie, and Paul Alivisatos, and Carolyn Bertozzi, and Jean Frechet, and Miquel Salmeron, and Jeff Bokor to help develop the, operationally, the Molecular Foundry.

Later as the building started to come up, I interacted with Jim Krupnick. He was the project director for the Foundry and I got a taste of 413 projects. And this is all as a postdoc. I was presenting to committees and things and helping them look at blueprints, where should all the outlets go in these cubicles and [00:02:00] things like that. And it was just not your standard postdoc. And, before I knew it, I got hired as a staff scientist. And actually was appointed.

Theory Facility acting director, as the first of four interim roles I've had at the Lab and leadership. And eventually a faculty member and then ended up taking over the Molecular Foundry director role.

Then later ALD and now this, I, yeah, I've really been very fortunate I think I've just, I've been able to I guess take advantage, a little bit, of all the opportunities the Lab has sent my way.

Part of it is being able to serve in these leadership roles and be part of not just doing the science, but the way the science is done. And I think having been doing that since almost the time as a postdoc, I find it natural to continue to do both of those things at the same time.

I've always been fortunate to be working with terrific people at each [00:03:00] one of these steps, and I think that's part of what has kept me on the trajectory that I'm on. And I now, what I find myself in is in a position where I've really been at this Lab for more than 22 years and I've been in several different roles from postdoc to this one. And I think it gives me a unique perspective.

[00:03:18] **John German:** Great. Many have seen how you operate as a leader while you are at the Foundry and in the Energy Sciences Area. For those who aren't as familiar with your history here at the Lab, how would you describe your leadership style?

[00:03:31] **Jeff Neaton:** That's a good question. Collaborative. I view leadership as a team activity. And I know in my role and the roles I've been in, it's so true that people are the thing that makes the Lab, what it is. And I like working with people and the teams I've been able to work with as a leader have been extraordinary.

I think my style is really listening a lot and making sure I'm hearing voices at all career stages.

I would say [00:04:00] communication is an important part of my style and I think it's one of the hardest things. And it's one of the most important things.

And I think my style is also trying to think about the science in making decisions recognizing we, we have these great strengths across the whole laboratory.

Other aspects are, I really value our external partnerships and building the relationships with DOE and UC and the other national labs I've found over the years, that's a huge part of it. Working with them and developing trust and good working relationships is critical.

And I think the other thing is I try to operate with the Lab values, respecting others and and treating transparency and fairness as major components of how I operate.

[00:04:50] **John German:** Thank you. So you've been in your interim CRO role for a couple of weeks now, how do you see that top research management role and what are some of the [00:05:00] CRO special responsibilities that you're learning about?

[00:05:02] **Jeff Neaton:** Yeah. No, I, it's a good question. I I think it's a really important role and I'm filling big shoes here we'll see how it goes. But but I would say I see this role as being responsible for stewarding the Lab's scientific strategy, its resources, and trying to maintain the high standard that has been set over 90 years of success.

I think the key things probably for the CRO at LBNL are really, acting as a little bit of an integrator. The scientific areas have, I think, strong leadership, and so if there are opportunities for the Lab to be greater than the sum of the parts, for example in AI, can we benefit from what we're doing in the different areas? Can we find opportunities to work together across areas?

Building external relationships, so representing the Lab's research enterprise externally, identifying opportunities, and positioning the Lab for future funding opportunities. Opening doors for the [00:06:00] researchers.

I would also just say I think culture is a huge part of the role too, and tied to that is very much workforce and recruiting and retaining scientific talent. Working with the ALDs and the division directors to ensure we're doing that.

And part of that is also working with Michael Brandt and COO to ensure that we have the facilities to perform world class science. These are some of the things I'm sure I'm gonna find out about a lot more.

[00:06:25] **John German:** That's a lot already.

[00:06:26] **Jeff Neaton:** That's a lot.

[00:06:27] **John German:** What are some Lab-wide research priorities you're thinking about as you step into this role?

[00:06:33] **Jeff Neaton:** AI is a big one. Part of the Lab's mission is science solutions for society. Doing earlier stage research that would benefit the country. And I think AI is everywhere. It's in every newspaper article and these days and it's penetrated our lives.

Everyone we know is interfacing with it in one way or another. And the technology really has outpaced our understanding of it. And exploring how best [00:07:00] to use this responsibly, in a trustworthy way in basic research, and modeling that in the national lab system, and so there's a research problem there and there's real utility there.

I think quantum is another area like that, where I don't know if we've reached an inflection point there, but it is a, an emerging area that's cross-cutting.

A couple of other things I would mention are applied energy and, how, we are gonna be building on all of our strength there and continuing to have impact with our kind of great long tradition in that space.

So it's a huge priority, to have the right scientific infrastructure, you know, to do these kind of major projects, and right now we have, you know, several exciting projects going on: ALS-U, NERSC 10, DESI and other, Greta other projects, uh, in the HEP [High Energy Physics] space. And these are critical to the Lab's mission. They're gonna enable, you know, exciting frontiers in science.

They're [00:08:00] gonna continue to maintain our vitality as a national lab, draw people to the lab, retain people they're part of, and be an integral part of our culture.

The ALS-U in particular is extraordinarily important to the nation's scientific enterprise. It is the nation's leading soft x-ray source, so it allows us to sort of, you know, make measurements that, uh, can't be made at other light sources in areas like, you know, materials, quantum, information science, microelectronics, biotechnology.

And this upgrade is going to, uh, catapult it to the world's leading soft x-ray source, and it's going to really also increase the amount, it's going to also make it a very unique data source, uh, that when combined with AI, you know, will, uh, enable us to do extraordinary things here.

So, you know, we're building on the 30 year history of, of the ALS. This upgrade is gonna, you know, enable another 30 [00:09:00] years of world class research.

And then I think finally I would say another priority is how do we interact with industry? How can we partner with industry effectively?

We're seeing bipartisan support for more interaction between the research enterprise and industry. And for a Lab that is doing increasingly more use, inspired work to serve, the country part of doing that is, is working with the other sectors of the research enterprise, university, and industry. And so I think there's a lot of opportunity there.

And, I'm excited about all those things that I just mentioned. We're doing amazing things in biology and biotechnology and fusion and fundamental physics is, is our DNA and, incredible stuff we're doing in that space.

So it, just to mention a few things. Those are some of the priorities I see.

[00:09:49] **John German:** Thank you. You've mentioned stewardship a couple of times and building a culture of stewardship has been one of the Lab Directorate's main priorities for a decade or so. How do you plan to [00:10:00] support and grow this culture of stewardship as the interim CRO?

[00:10:04] **Jeff Neaton:** Yes. That's a very important concept for us and, Mike, deserves a lot of credit for really making that a mainstream part of our environment. And, for me it's about people. The researchers at this Lab are special. The people who are in operations supporting those researchers are also special and they're all drawn to this place because of the great work that can happen here and that does happen here.

I think supporting them in their careers at all career stages, has a lot of overlap with this office and part of it is ensuring, there's clear, career pathways at the Lab, not just for doing what I did, but also, also that, but also within the scientific ranks or the operational ranks.

I think ensuring we have, the scientific infrastructure for people to do groundbreaking work or if we don't, [00:11:00] we have the external partnerships that allow for that. And I think we are we are highly regarded for the quality of people we have.

Some of that is owing to our proximity to the UC and the way the UC has run us. But but we are just highly regarded for that and ensuring we continue to have this terrific workforce would be a, a major part of this role.

[00:11:24] **John German:** You mentioned operations a couple times and the extraordinary operations team we have. How will you and the operations team work together to ensure that we continue to have the success we've had over the last decade or so?

[00:11:39] **Jeff Neaton:** Yeah so first of all, I've had the privilege of working with Michael Brandt for several years now as an ALD. I've also worked with him and his team very closely around the ALS-U project. And so I think the working relationship with our colleagues and operations is critical and that's a very important partnership and I [00:12:00] did want to just underscore there, they are an outstanding group of people.

[00:12:04] **John German:** Great. Thank you. So what are you most looking forward to in this role?

[00:12:11] **Jeff Neaton:** I am looking forward to being able to focus on some areas of the Lab I haven't had as much exposure to. I've been here for 22 years, but I feel like I've only explored a fraction of it and I really look forward to learning about what the areas are doing. Learning about what their priorities are, meeting the people who are working in those areas, and getting to know them better. I think that's probably the biggest thing I'm looking forward to.

I think it's an exciting time. It's a dynamic time. It's an interesting time. And thinking about how the Lab connects with AI and quantum and kind of pivots toward the next set of national priorities and challenges.

I think just being, being able to be part of a team that works to develop Lab strategy and execute on it at this time is exciting.

[00:12:58] **John German:** [00:13:00] Great.

Jeff, thank you for taking the time to be with us.

[00:13:03] **Jeff Neaton:** Thanks, John. It's a pleasure.