

UNM-G student group hosts panel on Uranium

Written by By Deswood Tome Sun Correspondent
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The UNM Gallup campus student association UNITY held a forum at Calvin Hall on the effects on health caused by historic uranium mining and milling in greater Gallup, Grants, and Crownpoint Nov. 2.

Five panelists spoke from their experiences over the last 50 years.

“There is no such thing as remediation when it comes to uranium,” Dr. Christine Lowery said to an auditorium of students, faculty, and area community members. “What I appreciate about eastern coastal tribes is they’re looking ahead seven generations. I live on the lip of the Jackpile mine.”

Jackpile is short for the Jackpile-Paguate uranium mine site located at the Pueblo of Laguna. The site was mined from 1953 to 1982 in three open pits on nearly 3,000 acres of land, removing 25 million tons of uranium ore.

Lowery is a member of the Pueblo of Laguna from Paguate north of New Laguna along Highway Interstate 40.

She recalled what Paguate looked like at age four, when her family worked on the rail in California. Back then, everything was alive and green. There was agriculture. There were a lot of sheepherders. The area was teeming with life.

“I have seen the change,” she said. “Our customs were very strong. All centered around

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agriculture. This was very important to us as a people. I came back when I was 50. We no longer had an agriculture base.”

Lowery believes that uranium mining for 30 years affected the culture and interfered with the Pueblo peoples ceremonies and beliefs.

“It affected our hunting, gathering, and ceremonies, and deer hunting,” Lowery said to the UNM-G audience. “This is such a big practice. Waiting for the hunters to come down the hill. Now they can’t. The road was rerouted around the mine.”

Navajo Nation Council Delegate Jonathan Perry, whose father and grandfather served on the Council, has devoted a greater portion of his career to bringing awareness about the affects of uranium mining and milling.

“I went to school in Oklahoma,” Perry said. “When I returned, I went to work in Crownpoint. No education was brought back to the community. In 2008, I thought uranium was a done deal.”

The Navajo Nation Council enacted a ban on all uranium mining, exploration, and milling with the passage of the Diné Natural Resources Protection Act of 2005.

In eastern Navajo, there are lands within the Navajo Nation that are private, including land owned by uranium mining companies. In 2010, the U.S. District Court of Appeals for the 10th Circuit upheld a Nuclear Regulatory Commission license allowing uranium companies to mine uranium in eastern Navajo.

In 2012, uranium company Hydro Resources Incorporated was successfully blocked by an access law passed by the Navajo Nation Council.

“That 30 feet played a big role in stopping access to their pilot project they wanted to do,” Perry said, which halted a proposed mining project in north Churchrock. The company has since sold

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their land.

Perry dates family medical ills to uranium mining in the 1940s.

“From 1943 forward, just looking at our medical records we have more cancers, kidney diseases, respiratory disease,” he said. “Prior to 1940s my family lived into their 90s. No failures. No health issues with them.”

Perry believes 1943 is the year the health of his family began to decline.

He now advocates for healthy living by using his position in the Council to continue banning uranium mining and milling.

UNITY will hold more forums on the affects of uranium mining in 2018 at the UNM-G campus.

UNITY President Percy B. Anderson, a student at UNM-Gallup campus, formed the student organization with others to bring attention to students on matters that affect their lives, communities on matters of health.

By Deswood Tome

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