

Navajo Agency residents talk about uranium, coronavirus, the 2020 election

Written by By Rick Abasta Communications Director 24th Navajo Nation Council
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Former council president compares pandemic fears to uranium experiences

SHIPROCK - The Naabik'íyáti' Committee convened at Diné College South Campus in Shiprock March 5 for the start of the uranium public hearing series. Legislation No. 0380-19, for approval of the uranium cleanup position statement, was originally debated during the Navajo Nation Council 2020 Winter Session.

The legislation was subsequently withdrawn by the sponsor, Council Delegate Kee Allen Begay Jr., after several members of Council requested adding their communities to the listing of areas impacted by uranium to make the position statement more comprehensive.

“This (public hearing) will become a resolution of the 24th Navajo Nation Council,” Speaker Seth Damon said. “The president will eventually sign the position statement for the Navajo Nation.” He added that the Council met with the U.S. EPA Feb. 28 for a one-on-one consultation regarding the 10-year plan. Speaker Damon said \$1.7 billion was available to begin the cleanup of 219 mines.

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COUNCIL AND U.S. EPA CONSULTATION

According to the EPA, 46 priority sites were identified in 5-year plans, with most of the assessment work completed at the sites. There were 3,809 families that received access to safe drinking water through a partnership with IHS. Additionally, more than 1,000 homes were scanned and more than 50 homes with mining-related contamination were remediated.

NAVAJO NATION RESIDENTS SPEAK

The floor was opened to the public and residents were allowed three minutes to speak. Twenty-two people came forward to speak. Eva Stokley said she was speaking on behalf of her husband Peter and his mother, both originally from Burnt Corn, Ariz.

“I’m going to speak on the downwinders,” she said, struggling to hold back tears. She said residents from the area live in the traditional way, most often unaware of the uranium being carried downwind. She said many people were contracting cancer and other ailments.

Henry Tso spoke next and said uranium has impacted the land, air and water. He called the Navajo Nation Council the spearhead for the tribe. “You’re the spear that protects the Navajo Nation. We lost our mom and dad from Hard Rock due to uranium mining,” he said, adding that the Council needed to take action on uranium, which has been talked about for decades and studied numerous times. “We need to quit talking about it and do something,” he said.

Cove Chapter President James Benally said public hearings have already been conducted through the Navajo Nation Uranium Advisory Committee under former president Russell Begaye. “Region 9 Superfund has been meeting with us. Cove is doing removal site evaluation and engineering evaluation cost analysis in consultation with the tribal government,” he said. “Instead of trying to create something new, why don’t we let U.S. EPA be the lead agency? We can build capacity for Navajo AML.”

TOO MANY STUDIES

Terry Charley asked how long the issue would be studied, especially since it's been 70 years since uranium extraction first began on Navajo land. "Too many studies and risk assessments have been done. Our people want action. They're crying because of it. We have tons of radioactive waste, but we've yet to quantify this," he said.

Shiprock Chapter President Duane "Chili" Yazzie said Navajos consider the earth as their Mother. "We as Diné people have this intrinsic relationship with our Earth Mother. She has a spirit and is alive. Uranium is a part of her body as a caution. But we uncovered it and the effects are tremendous," he said. Yazzie said the land needed to be blessed through traditional Navajo prayer before it was returned back to normal.

Phil Harrison said he is originally from Cove, Ariz. and he is a former uranium miner and remediation worker. "I'm the lead consultant for the RECA Reauthorization of 2019," he said, adding that he and others traveled to Washington, D.C. in 2007 to testify during the Waxman Hearing. "Uranium is eating us. Our kids and grandkids are going to ask us why we didn't fix it. Let's do something and take action today," he said.

RECA GENESIS

Stella Tsosie, Lake Valley Chapter Secretary-Treasurer said the first Radiation Exposure Compensation Act request came from Lake Valley Chapter. "It was started by a former miner, Sarah Benally. That's where this RECA all started from. Today, people are compensated because of this," she said, adding that her father hauled uranium ore in the mountains of Cove for a Colorado-based uranium company. Tsosie's father met her mother working for the company and eventually moved to Oak Springs after constructing a home for his family. The foundation, however, was constructed from local stones contaminated with uranium. She said the uranium-contaminated structures still stand today and asked what entity would tear down the buildings.

San Juan County Commission Glojean Todacheene, D-Dist. 1, said her mother worked as a licensed nurse practitioner who contracted cancer and eventually lived to the age of 86. "In

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1981, something was wrong with her and they had surgery. It was cancer and it was malignant," she said. "(Navajos) are survivors and we're really tough people, but I worry about our health."

FORMER LEADERS SPEAK

Former Speaker Johnny Naize said his constituents in the Blue Gap-Tachee Chapter were impacted by orphan mines in the area. "People who are affected need to be sitting at the table when we're discussing the issue of cleanup," he said.

Former president Peterson Zah said uranium cleanup needs to be the number [one] priority for the Navajo Nation. He said Navajos need to be like cicadas and sing the same tune when it comes to the uranium issue. "This is an election year. There are only two Democrats left, Joe Biden and Bernie Sanders. You know about the coronavirus and white people are so afraid because of the potential for an epidemic outbreak. What they're afraid of is what Navajos are going through with uranium," he said.

The public hearings on uranium were originally scheduled to continue this week when the Naabik'iyáti' Committee planned to convene in Chinle March 13 and in Tuba City March 14. Please check with the Navajo Nation Council about these meeting dates.

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