

Public Meeting on Northeast Churchrock Mine Cleanup

Written by By Leona Morgan For the Sun
Friday, 18 December 2020 10:47

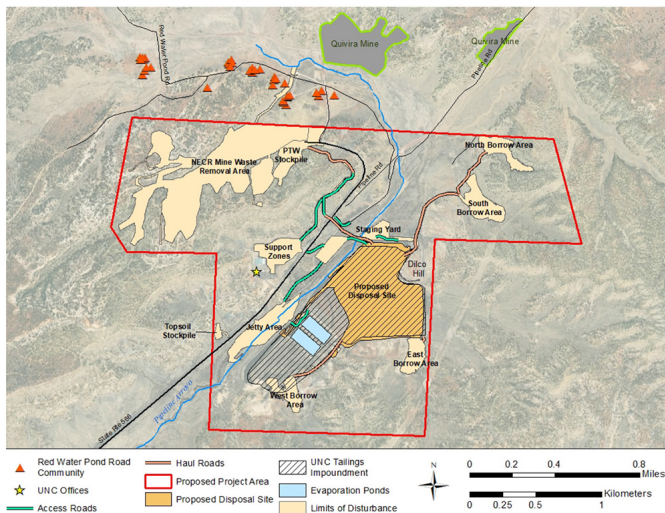


Figure 2.2-2 Proposed Project Area Layout



Figure 3.6-2 Looking East Across the NRC-Licensed Mill Tailings Impoundment (i.e., the Central Portion of the Proposed Disposal Site) Covered by the Reclaimed Vegetative Community (Source: A. Minor)

There are 523 abandoned uranium mines on Navajo Nation that have been identified for cleanup through the joint federal and Navajo Nation multi-agency five-year plans which started in 2008. This does not include the totality of legacy contamination, such as places where contaminated materials were moved offsite either purposefully or accidentally.

One area that is a priority for cleanup is north of Churchrock, N. M., known as the Red Water Pond Road community where two companies Kerr McGee and United Nuclear Corporation operated. UNC, now owned by General Electric, mined uranium at the Northeast Churchrock Mine and processed the ore at their nearby uranium mill. The mill is the site where the 1979

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uranium spill originated.

UNC/GE is proposing to clean up the NECR site by moving one million cubic yards of mine waste atop the mill waste, which requires an amendment to their Source Material License (SUA-1475) under the U.S. Nuclear Regulatory Commission.

The more radioactive wastes would be moved to another facility. The White Mesa Mill in southeast Utah, which is located three miles north of the indigenous community of the Ute Mountain Ute Nation, is one site under consideration. There, the waste would be processed through the White Mesa Mill and the resulting waste stored onsite indefinitely.

The NRC scheduled two public meetings on Dec. 2 and Dec. 9, on the Draft Environmental Impact Statement for the Disposal of Mine Waste at the United Nuclear Corporation Mill Site in McKinley County, N. M. NRC's announcement states: "Public participation is actively sought for this meeting to fully engage the public in a discussion of regulatory issues," and "The NRC invites members of the public to attend the public meeting webinar and to present oral comments on the draft EIS." Due to the Covid-19 pandemic, NRC is hosting these meetings virtually with slides viewable online and audio communication via teleconference.

The first meeting, held on Dec. 2, started with a Diné prayer and introductions by U.S. NRC and the NNEPA Superfund staff with a translation from English to Navajo. The slide presentation was followed by public comments.

The NRC presentation had 20 slides: seven explaining the NRC role and process; two slides on the proposal with a map; eight slides to summarize: the findings of the scoping process, Environmental Impact Statement, Proposed Action and Alternatives, and Environmental Review; and three slides on where to find more information online and how to submit public comments.

The Environmental Review evaluated the following criteria on a scale of small, moderate, or large: Noise-moderate; Historic and Cultural-small to large; Visual and Scenic-moderate; Socioeconomic-small; Environmental Justice-disproportionately high and adverse environmental impacts; Public and Occupational Health-small, and Waste Management-small.

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Regarding Environmental Justice, NRC's Impact Evaluation cites that the "human health and environmental impacts" will affect "low-income and minority populations"... "including all of McKinley County;" and the "closest communities to site are primarily Navajo, who may be impacted by: traffic, dust, noise." Without any further details on the 1979 UNC uranium spill, NRC also lists the "historic mill operations," "dam failure," and "groundwater contamination" with an "ongoing corrective action plan" as part of the EJ impact evaluation.

Under the Historic and Cultural Resources evaluation, NRC recognizes "5 sites recommended as eligible for the National Register [of] Historic Places," with four at the mine site and one at the mill site. For which, NRC also notes it is "Developing a programmatic agreement in coordination with EPA, Navajo Nation, and the New Mexico Historic Preservation Office."

The visual portion of the meeting requires participants to download the Webex app to see the slides and some of the NRC staff who have their cameras on, but does not allow participants to see the facilitator or other members of the public. The way NRC uses Webex only allows members of the public to see the names of some staff and the participant's own name. The public has no way of knowing how many are in attendance unless the facilitator announces the total number. It is also impossible to know who is online or on the phone, unless they make comments. An inquiry to NRC staff Ashley Waldron confirmed that nine NRC representatives, twelve Navajo Nation Environmental Protection Agency staff, and about 85 members of the public were in attendance.

Seventeen speakers submitted public comments, with some making subsequent comments. Two community members, Larry King and Teracita Keyanna, were on the call and voiced concerns about the plan and the slow process. Keyanna expressed her personal connection to the area and that she had opted to be temporarily moved to nearby Gallup during the cleanup. She stated her own personal health impacts in her testimony and how she and her family long to return home. Other comments regarded the cleanup plan as a future accident in the making, similar to the 1979 uranium spill, as the existing mill site is in a flood plain that feeds into the Puerco River.

Former Navajo Nation Council Delegate Jonathan Perry commented on the lack of internet and phone access, especially for the most impacted Red Water Pond Road community. He also outlined the current inability for the residents to travel and access public wifi or to get cell phone service as the Nation is on lockdown due to the current international Covid-19 health crisis.

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Several NNEPA Superfund staff members also made comments, including Environmental Program Manager Dariel Yazzie who spoke about the “eighty years of impacts that need to be addressed” from the “disharmony created by uranium mining to Diné people”

In a subsequent interview with Yazzie, he speaks first from a community perspective and then elaborates more from his professional capacity. Coming from the Monument Valley community, his family lived less than a quarter mile from a uranium mine and mill. His paternal grandparents, Luke Yazzie Sr. and June Yazzie, both died from cancer. His father Daniel Yazzie was also impacted by heart disease and lung disease, which he attributes to working at both the mine and the mill.

From his perspective as the Navajo Superfund Environmental Program Manager, Yazzie explains that there needs to be more dialogue with the NRC, that there is an urgency to “haul away all of the waste,” not just moving it from the UNC mine to the mill. He alludes to a more comprehensive cleanup plan that involves more discussion with Navajo Nation and the community, not just the NRC dictating to the community a decision that has already been made. According to Yazzie, the proposal and process is “not in line with U.S. EPA CERCLA,” which is the federal Comprehensive Environmental Response, Compensation, and Liability Act, also known as Superfund; and it goes “against Navajo CERLA, which is based on Navajo Fundamental Law which requires respectful discussion” between the involved parties.

Yazzie states, “Today, there are some young Navajos with the education who can play a vital role in these issues.” Yazzie continues with an emphasis on the work needed to address the uranium legacy, “It’s very personal to all of us.”

The deadline for comments has been extended from Dec. 28, 2020 to Feb. 26, 2021. One more virtual public meeting will be held in early 2021 (not scheduled yet).

The public may submit written comments via standard mail or email and oral comments during public meetings or via voicemail. Comments should include: Docket ID NRC-2019-0026. All comments will be considered public record and posted on NRC’s website. NRC advises not to provide information that should not be made publicly available, such as personal contact info.

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The public can mail comments to: Office of Administration, Mail Stop: TWFN-7-A60M, U.S. Nuclear Regulatory Commission, Washington, DC 20555-0001, ATTN: Program Management, Announcements and Editing Staff; email comments to: UNC-ChurchRockEIS.resource@nrc.gov; or leave a voicemail at: 888-672-3425.

Information about the NRC License Amendment process and meeting information can be found online at:

<https://www.nrc.gov/info-finder/decommissioning/uranium/united-nuclear-corporation-unc-public-mtgs.html>

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