

A century of federal indifference left generations of Navajo homes without running water

Written by Elizabeth Miller New Mexico In Depth April 12, 2021
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When Julie Badonie was growing up in the small Navajo community of Tohatchi in the 1940s, her father drove a horse-drawn wagon early each morning to a nearby spring. There, he filled wooden barrels with water the family would use that day to drink, cook, and wash.

Badonie, the youngest of seven children, including brothers who fought in World War II and the Korean War, or one of her siblings would go along. She remembers it as fun. At home, a hose siphoned the water into buckets to bring into the house.

Badonie left for boarding school in kindergarten, first just a few miles across town, then several days' travel away in Crownpoint, where an older sister worked as a cook, and eventually, all the way to Albuquerque for high school. Coming home meant coming back to life without flushing toilets, running faucets, or lights that turned on with a switch, but she didn't mind.

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“We just enjoyed being home with our parents, our sisters, our brothers, you know, so that didn’t really matter,” Badonie said. “When you go home, you’re free.”

Tó’háách’ih means “One Who Digs for Water,” a reference to a seep near the Chuska (Ch’ooshgai) or “White Pine” Mountains.

The community tucks between the blue ridges of Ch’ooshgai Mountain, frosted with snow in winter. When that snow melts or rain falls, water runs off the peaks into a canyon where horses browse among junipers. Erosion and rockfall have so narrowed the dirt road up the canyon that, today, an ambulance can’t reach the few houses higher on the ridge, and even the propane trucks struggle.

A chapterhouse the color of cream trimmed with maroon houses local government offices stand near a senior center, where staff hand meals into car windows as lunchtime approaches, and a preschool with a playground, quiet this year with schools closed by the pandemic. Across the street, boxy houses with stucco walls and peaked roofs line up in rows.

For the last eight years, Badonie has visited the chapterhouse almost every day. After her retirement, she became more involved, running for office and serving as chapter vice president and president. Her term ended in December, but she’s still a frequent presence, helping new officials with ongoing projects.

Among those concerns is connecting more of Tohatchi’s residents with utilities, and ensuring a long-term, abundant water supply for the community itself.

“The population is growing, and we need to have water,” Badonie said.

Badonie’s house, like most homes close to Tohatchi, now has running water and electricity. But the 800 to 900 people in Tohatchi, and another 600 to 800 in Mexican Springs, eight miles to the west, all depend on a single well and single pump.

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If the pump running it fails, or if the water level in it drops — both issues that have troubled nearby Gallup this year — water will cut out for the homes, the head-start center, the schools, the clinic, the senior center, five churches, and the convenience store and gas station.

It's a tenuous situation common across the Navajo Nation, and one that also keeps Tohatchi from growing.

But there's promise in the community's location along the route for the Navajo-Gallup Water Supply Project, which will draw water from the San Juan River and deliver it to communities on the eastern side of the Navajo Nation.

The project consists of two pipelines. A 200-mile pipeline, called the San Juan Lateral, will move 37,700 acre feet of water each year as far south as Gallup, an economic center in western New Mexico surrounded by a patchwork of Navajo Nation and private land whose long-term water supply is in jeopardy due to groundwater depletion. Another smaller pipeline, called the Cutter Lateral, branches east about 100 miles and was completed in the fall of 2020.

Because of delays, the San Juan pipeline likely won't distribute its first water until 2028, nearly 20 years after Congress approved the plan and nearly a quarter of a century after the Navajo Nation and New Mexico agreed to it.

But it promises a drastic improvement. The new water would relieve the single well and pump in Tohatchi. In other places, the pipeline will provide running water to some of the 30 to 40% of Navajo Nation residents who still live without it in their homes.

For those people, often elders, water to cook with, to wash their hands or splash over their faces, comes from barrels and jugs.

Refilling those barrels can mean driving tens of miles over dirt roads that stay slick for days after it rains or snows and paying for it by the gallon. They might use closer, unregulated water sources, which can carry contaminants and create health concerns.

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Indian Health Service reports estimate ten percent of American Indian and Alaska Native homes lack potable water, compared to a national average of 1 percent. The largest share of these homes scatter through remote Alaskan Native villages. The second largest is in the Navajo Nation, an area that covers 27,000 square miles in western New Mexico, southern Utah, and eastern Arizona and is bigger than 10 of 50 U.S. states.

When COVID-19 reached the Navajo Nation last spring, infections spiked to the highest per capita rate in the United States. The absence of a fundamental tenet of life in America — clean drinking water in every home — exacerbated conditions that spread the virus.

“Every Navajo member has family members who live remotely and don’t have running water — We knew this was going to be an issue from the beginning,” said Andrew Curley, a member of the Navajo Nation and an assistant professor at the University of Arizona who has studied indigenous water use, water laws, and settlements. “There is a strange, worrying correlation and overlap: You see that the places we know have less running water, and have all these problems ... are also the same places that have high infection rates.”

Repeated academic and government agency reports have pointed to the lack of water as a failure of the federal government, which pledged to create viable communities for the Diné (Navajo people) in exchange for their 1868 treaty agreement to live on a fraction of their historic homeland. In shorthand, this is called the federal trust system.

Despite the federal responsibility, the Navajo Nation has waited more than a century for pipes and water treatment plants that would bring drinking water to all of its people while watching nearby off-reservation cities and farms grow, swallowing up water from the Colorado River Basin that the tribe has a claim to.

In 2009, the U.S. Congress signed off on an agreement between the Navajo Nation and the state of New Mexico that settled Navajo claims to water for drinking and household use. For the first time since the treaty was signed, the tribe had a number for how much water they were owed.

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Had they taken the question through the legal system, the tribe might have won far more water, but in working with Congress, they made a deal that appeased all sides. The Navajo Nation secured both an official amount of water and federal funding to build a pipeline to move that water toward communities. In exchange, they agreed to less water than a judge might have awarded and assured Congressional representatives from other states along the Colorado River that adding tribal water use in the strained river basin would not someday force the likes of Phoenix and Las Vegas to turn off their taps.

The agreement brought more water into the Nation. But it left communities, like Tohatchi, with the burden of finding ways to build lines to connect to the new pipeline.

“The problem is not a Navajo problem; it’s a government problem and it’s a bureaucracy problem and it’s a problem that continues to center corporate interests or large-scale development schemes over the needs of everyday citizens,” Janene Yazzie, co-founder of Sixth World Solutions, a business that works with Navajo Nation communities on sustainable development, said. “We’re considered a democracy and the leader of the free world, but we don’t have a human right to water in our own country.”

Next time Part two: The longstanding link between water and health

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