

Mining for helium

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A potential non-fossil fuel future for the Navajo Nation

In considering an update of the Navajo Nation's 2013 energy policy, the subject of underground helium took the spotlight Jan. 25 as 24th Navajo Nation Council Speaker Seth Damon joined by Navajo Nation Oil and Gas Chief Executive Officer, James McClure, and Board Chairman Lennard Eltsosie held a community meeting to hear from local leaders, elders, medicine people, and grazing permit holders regarding potential helium development in Sanostee, N.M.

The Bureau of Land Management describes helium as a non-renewable natural resource commonly recovered from natural gas deposits by drilling. Helium is useful in the medical field because it can cool essential diagnostic equipment such as MRI machines. It is also used in rocket engine testing, to detect gas leaks, and for space science research.

During the Winter Session this week, the Navajo Nation Council is considering Legislation No. 0232-21 Damon sponsored to approve oil and gas operating agreements between the Navajo Nation and NNOG for the Tohatchi Wash, Blue Gap Mountain, and Porcupine Dome in the northern agency.

"The development of helium in this region has the potential to bring annual royalty revenue and create jobs," Damon. (Bááhaalí, Chichiltah, Manuelito, Red Rock, Rock Springs, Tséyatoh), told those gathered at the meeting. "This includes thousands of dollars in new scholarship funds for our students and potential revenue for chapters.

"This legislation is a necessary investment into the future for the next seven generations,"

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Damon said.

Around 100 community members joined Resources and Development Committee Chairman Rickie Nez, Madame Chair Eugenia Charles-Newton, Council Delegate Amber Kanazbah Crotty, Council Delegate Elmer Begay, and Damon in front of the Sanostee Veterans Center.

“Navajo Nation Oil and Gas has hosted several meetings with communities across the northern agency regarding the development of underground helium,” Council Delegate Amber Kanazbah Crotty (Cove, Toadlena/Two Grey Hills, Red Valley, Tsé’ahnáoozt’í’í, Sheep Springs, Beclabito, Gad’ii’áhí/Tó Ko’í), said. “...Many of our families in the area are still dealing with the trauma of uranium mining, so there are always concerns about any type of natural resource extraction.

“There needs to be further conversations on the possible health impacts of mining for helium,” Crotty continued. “This legislation approving an operating agreement needs to be modified to benefit the impacted community and not Window Rock [Ariz.]”

“We have to understand that helium is safe and not a fossil fuel. It does not have a carbon footprint that would impact climate change,” Council Delegate Elmer Begay (Dilcon, Indian Wells, Teesto, Whitecone, Greasewood Springs), explained. “Plus the mining for helium is already happening here in Sanostee and across northern New Mexico.

“Navajo Nation Oil and Gas will be drilling within a foot radius, a mile deep into the ground, just like how we also drill 1,000 feet to access water wells,” Begay continued. “This would benefit the Navajo people and the communities in the project area.

All electronics, cars, and trucks take energy to power from fossil fuels. There needs to be a balance, so we can pursue helium development to create jobs and develop our infrastructure during this pandemic,” he said.

The search for helium is the same as drilling for clean water according to NNOG Chief Executive Officer James McClure.

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“There are 40 opportunities around the Navajo Nation for helium extraction that potentially could bring over a billion dollars in new revenue.,” McClure said. “One-point-seven-million in royalties based on sales could also go to chapters in the region for local economic development initiatives and youth scholarships.

Chairman Rickie Nez (T’iistsoh Sikaad, Nenahnezad, Upper Fruitland, Tsé Daa K’aan, Newcomb, San Juan), pointed out the current need for fossil fuel in just getting to the meeting by car or truck.

“What other options do the Navajo people have without trucks to haul wood and livestock, or cars to take us to local towns for groceries and other essential items?” Nez said. “There must be some understanding between those who are against this and those in favor of helium extraction.

“It is a safe process that will yield significant revenue for the Navajo people,” Nez went on. “It is my belief that K’é should be the catalyst to bring us together during these difficult times.”

The operating agreement provides a primary term of 10 years for helium exploration and a secondary term for production should helium be discovered. NNOG must protect all Navajo water resources and obtain necessary permits for seismic testing, drilling, and for any ground disturbances including the construction of pipelines.