

Special Focus Story: Navajo tribal land uranium clean-up plans inch forward

Written by By Rachelle Nones Sun Correspondent
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The Navajo describe the powdery yellow uranium ore present in their water, air, and land as leetso--meaning “yellow dirt.”

In July of 1979, a dam collapse at United Nuclear Corporation’s Northeast Church Rock Mine caused tons of uranium waste and massive amounts of radioactive water to pour into the Puerco River—creating a major environmental disaster that continues to contaminate the land, air, and water in Navajo communities today.

Additionally, hundreds of closed uranium mines are located throughout the Navajo Nation—negatively impacting the health of Navajo children and adults whenever radioactive dust particles from mine debris is inhaled or blown into drinking water sources.

2022 BRINGS HEARTENING DEVELOPMENTS

On April 22, residents of the Red Water Pond Road community, located near Church Rock, held an Association Public Meetings and Listening Session with U.S. Nuclear Regulatory Commission Chairman Christopher Hanson and two other NRC members. Navajo Nation President Jonathan Nez and Navajo Nation EPA Director Valinda Shirley also attended. During the meeting, the EPA's plans for relocating toxic waste from Northeast Church Rock's closed uranium mines were discussed.

Shirley credits the Biden/Harris administration with the sudden movement forward.

"The Secretary of Energy Granholm has been out here several times. Then we had the administrator Regan of the US EPA come out here too. Usually, we don't get this kind of attention, but with the change in the administration we've noticed an uptick in some of these discussions and visits," Shirley said.

Another promising development occurred on April 28, when the Senate approved an extension of the Radiation Exposure Compensation Act, which was due to expire in July. The RECA expansion is vitally important because it provides compensation for Navajo uranium contamination victims.

"There are so many sites. The water contamination kind of follows a lot of the mining. Some people can easily say that the mining caused the contamination. But the other flip side to that coin too is that areas that were mined do have naturally occurring radioactive materials like radium, uranium, and arsenic because those heavy materials are already there," Shirley said. That's always been the hard question to answer—did the mining actually cause the contamination?"

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On Shirley's wish list for future exploration is a comprehensive health study to figure out the impact of uranium exposure on Navajo communities. "The federal government doesn't have any studies on their side to say it is safe. So, you can't tell me that it's safe without those kinds of studies to back you up," Shirley said.

According to Diane Stearns, PhD, professor of biochemistry and associate vice president for research at Northern Arizona University (via email), the impact of uranium exposure on health depends on numerous factors, including the duration and frequency of exposure, the chemical makeup of the contamination, and the amount of the most toxic chemicals in the soil.

Stearns noted, "Uranium gives off alpha radiation, which does not penetrate clothing; however, inhaled uranium is harmful if the alpha radiation is directly interacting with lung tissue."

NO EASY SOLUTIONS

There are Navajo people calling for total mine waste removal from Navajo land while others believe, in some instances, that uranium removal requires compromise. Shirley told the *Sun* she was concerned that hauling toxic waste from sites in hard-to-reach mountainous areas would irretrievably damage the ecosystem.

Concerning uranium clean-up solutions at more accessible populated areas, such as Northeast Church Rock, Shirley feels differently, "I do think it really has to be off Navajo and away from the community," Shirley said.

For more information on this issue, visit:

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The Radiation Exposure Compensation Act

<https://www.justice.gov/civil/common/reca>

Abandoned Mines Cleanup

<https://www.epa.gov/navajo-nation-uranium-cleanup/abandoned-mines-cleanup>

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