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WINDOW ROCK, Ariz.—Navajo Nation President Russell Begaye announced that he intends to take legal action against the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency for the massive release of mine waste into the Animas River near Silverton, Colorado.

Begaye made this announcement on Aug. 8 at the Shiprock Chapter House, which was packed to capacity with concerned community members living along the San Juan River.

“They are not going to get away with this,” he said of the destructive impact to natural habitats and ecosystems that traditional Navajo culture relies on.

He said the sludge has migrated into the San Juan River and is wending through the Navajo Nation. The plume is expected to reach Lake Powell by Wednesday.

“The EPA was right in the middle of the disaster and we intend to make sure the Navajo Nation recovers every dollar it spends cleaning up this mess and every dollar it loses as a result of injuries to our precious Navajo natural resources,” he said.

“I have instructed Navajo Nation Department of Justice to take immediate action against the EPA to the fullest extent of the law to protect Navajo families and resources,” he added.

“The EPA also needs to fund an independent lab onsite for real time monitoring of chemicals that may migrate into our irrigation or public water system,” Begaye said.

**Stories of struggle and survival**

The chapter members were very appreciative that Begaye and Vice President Jonathan Nez met with them in this moment of crisis as the plume of contamination approached their community.

The community shared their stories of struggle and survival along the river and underscored just how important farming and ranching is to their way of life and the economy of the region.

Shiprock is one of the largest farming communities on the Nation and it relies heavily upon irrigation from the San Juan to supply its many farms with water.

Navajo EPA will be conducting independent tests on the water and sediment quality and the Nation will utilize the data that is gathered for their own investigation on the contamination. The plume is estimated to be traveling at four miles per hour.

Harlan Cleveland of Navajo Nation Department of Emergency Management said the contaminated water plume reached Farmington at 8:10 a.m. on Aug. 8 and joined the San Juan River.

The plume is more than 80 miles long.

Several communities have stopped pumping water from the river and San Juan County has issued an emergency declaration and closed the river until further notice.

Rex Koontz, deputy general manager of Navajo Tribal Utility Authority, stated in a press release that NTUA water systems from Farmington to Beclabito are “fed from a different system isolated from the San Juan River.”

The Navajo Nation irrigation systems ceased pulling water from the river earlier this week.

**San Juan River is their Lifeline**

President Begaye said the U.S. EPA must provide affected tribal members water for drinking, irrigation, and livestock. In addition, hay and feed will also be needed for livestock.

“The San Juan River is their lifeline. We want full disclosure on what chemicals were released into the river. We understand cleanup will take decades. We demand cleanup of this water and the sediments of our affected rivers immediately,” Begaye said.

Navajo farmers pumped water for their cattle, sheep and horses. Others fished the river and explored it recreationally.

“We’re not talking about a small population or area like Farmington. We have Navajo families affected from Upper Fruitland all the way to Lake Powell,” he said.

The Navajo Nation is larger than 10 U.S. states and is the size of West Virginia. The San Juan River courses through much of the northern region of the Nation and feeds into the Colorado River, which also traverses the vast tribal territory.

**Childhood memories of contamination**

During his childhood, Begaye lived along the banks of the San Juan River. One year, he remembered the fish were dying and floating to the surface. He jumped into the river with others to investigate further.

“The river smelled for weeks. Fish were dying along the riverbank. No one ever told us what happened, how the fish died or if it would impact our health years later. To this day, nobody told us. That will not happen this time,” he said.