Written by By Leona Morgan Co-founder of Diné No Nukes and the Albuquerque-based Nuclear Issues Study Group
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In New Mexico, due to the many nuclear sites, at any give time there are several new and ongoing threats to our communities, our public health, and our Mother Earth. Currently, the various federal and state agencies and respective contractors are planning to expand activities while there is still much to clean up at each site.

In the northern part of the state, plans for increased plutonium pit production for nuclear weapons at Los Alamos National Labs is underway. In the southeast, proposed changes to the types and amounts of radioactive waste that can be stored in New Mexico are ongoing, including expansions to the Waste Isolation Pilot Plant facility and the two proposed nuclear power plant waste dumps: Holtec and Waste Control Specialists. Holtec's application has just gone through a public comment period that ended on Sept. 22 for the Draft Environmental Impact Statement. Now the DEIS for WCS's proposal to bring 40,000 metric tons of high-level radioactive waste to a site along the New Mexico-Texas state line, near Eunice, New Mexico is open for public comment until Nov. 3.

The Nuclear Regulatory Commission will hold four webinars in place of in-person public meetings, to be held on Oct. 1, 6, 8, and 15.

With this administration's push for so-called "strategic" and "critical" minerals, the uranium industry is still alive despite the price remaining under forty dollars per pound for the last four years. There is no current uranium mining in New Mexico, but there are hundreds of mines that require cleanup, and more than 15,000 "abandoned" uranium mines across the country.

Since 2008, the U.S. government has been working with the Navajo Nation, in five-year plans, to clean up 523 abandoned uranium mines and four former mill sites on the Navajo Nation. However, there are hundreds of additional contaminated sites, adjacent to or within the reservation boundary, but not technically on Navajo Nation. The first five-year plan was from 2008 to 2013, and the second one was from 2014 to 2018. The latest proposal for cleanup is a ten-year plan for the period 2020-2029, which is still in draft form.

The federal agencies working on this cleanup include the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, Bureau of Indian Affairs, Nuclear Regulatory Commission, Department of Energy, Indian Health Service, Agency for Toxic Substance and Disease Registry, and Centers for Disease Control. The Navajo Nation agencies involved are Navajo EPA, Abandoned Mine Lands Reclamation Department, and Department of Water Resources. Other partners include: University of New Mexico, Northern Arizona University, as well as the Hopi Nation.

One of the most contaminated areas on Navajo is north of Churchrock in a community called Red Water Pond Road. There were two companies that mined there, Kerr McGee (now known as Quivira) and United Nuclear Corporation (UNC, now owned by General Electric). UNC also operated a mill site that was the source of the 1979 Churchrock Spill.

Due to its proximity to the RWPR community, the UNC Northeast Churchrock uranium mine has been a high priority from the beginning, yet is nowhere near completion. The residents have insisted that wastes be moved off of the Navajo Nation. Some remediation of the NECR mine has been conducted, including removal of contaminated soils from residences to lands that are not on Navajo, but close enough to be carried back by the wind.

General Electric is responsible for remediation of the NECR uranium mine and the mill site. The mill operated from 1977 to 1982 and released over 90 million gallons of liquid radioactive waste and over 1,100 tons of radioactive sludge into the environment on July 16, 1979. The liquid flowed at least 100 miles westward into Arizona via the Puerco River.

For cleanup of the mine, GE proposes moving approximately one million cubic yards of mine waste atop the existing mill tailings impoundment; and removal of approximately 32,000 cubic yards of more radioactive wastes offsite, to either Utah or Texas. The mill site is on privately owned land and has been undergoing remediation and monitoring, but the off-site contamination from the spill has never been adequately addressed.

The RWPR community has been demanding clean up of their area and *all* sites across the Navajo Nation for over a decade, including demands for new housing, funding for education, and a full comprehensive health study. In an August interview with Edith Hood, the main spokesperson for the RWPR Community Association, Hood explains, “We want the community and the impacted ground cleaned up … We want this concept of
‘hózhó’
back in the community, all across the Navajo Nation, with us included.”

The proposed action to move mine waste to the mill site requires an amendment to the NRC materials license for the mill (SUA-1475). GE submitted the license amendment application in Sept. 2018. NRC notified the public of its intent to prepare an environmental impact statement, to conduct a scoping process, and request for public comments in Feb. 2019. NRC held two scoping meetings in Gallup in March 2019. At these public meetings, locals expressed disappointment in the slow remediation process and strong opposition against moving mine waste on top of the mill waste, which they said is located in a flood plain.

A Draft Environmental Impact Statement is expected this month, Oct. 2020. The Final EIS is estimated to be complete by Aug. 2021, and a final decision could be made in 2022.

Since 2009, the Red Water Pond Road Community has held an annual public event with a sunrise prayer, walk, and talks to raise awareness about uranium mining, the spill, and cleanup. This year, due to Covid-19, they were not able to gather, but next year they plan to carry on and Hood says the RWPR welcomes “anyone who is doing something to help Mother Earth” to join their community event in 2021.

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