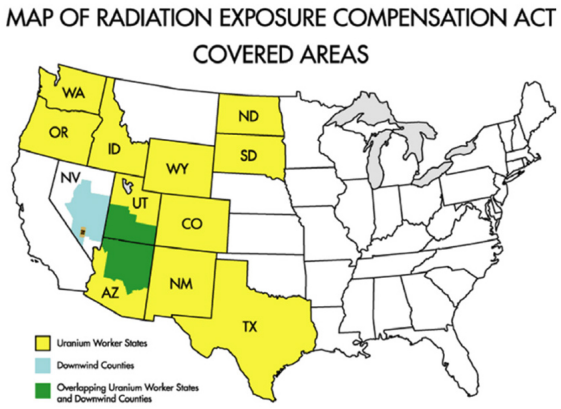


WINDOW ROCK, Ariz. — Updates to Congressional lobbying efforts by the Navajo Nation to amend the Radiation Exposure Compensation Act were delivered to the 24th Navajo Nation Council during its Nov. 17 special meeting.

“This is an issue of life. This is an issue that requires, and does deserve, everyone’s utmost attention in Congress,” Matt Sandgren, founder and principal of Innovative Policy, the Navajo Nation’s RECA lobbying firm in Washington, D. C. said. Sandgren was joined by Innovative Policy staff Melanie Bowen and Ron Dean during the report to the committee.

Without the amendment, the RECA will expire in July 2022 in spite of widespread continued negative effects experienced by Navajo people from the federal government’s uranium extraction activities in and around the Navajo Nation.

The current bills in Congress comprising the Radiation Exposure Compensation Act Amendments of 2019 are H.R.3793, sponsored by Rep. Ben Ray Luján, D-N.M., and S.947, sponsored by Sen. Mike Crapo, R-Idaho. H.R.3793 currently has 48 co-sponsors of the legislation and S.947 has 10 co-sponsors.

The amendments sought by the Navajo Nation include an expansion of the classification of eligible recipients of federal restitution under RECA — specifically, the downwinder classification that currently excludes counties and areas like San Juan County and McKinley

County in New Mexico, in addition to counties in the vicinity of the Trinity testing site.

Bowen noted in discussions with Congressional offices, that widespread bipartisan support exists for the Navajo Nation's priorities with RECA.

Additional amendments being sought by the Navajo Nation include an increase to restitution from the current amount of $50,000 to $150,000; the addition of uranium core drillers to those eligible for claims under RECA; and an extension of the deadline for workers to file claims for work performed in the uranium activity area from Dec. 31, 1971, to a proposed end date in 1990.

Council delegates pressed the importance of actively communicating with the incoming Congress and the Biden-Harris Administration.

"My request would be to schedule a meeting with the Biden-Harris transitional team, so they are aware of the challenges that we are facing. I know Vice President-elect Harris was on the Senate Judiciary Committee and she is aware of some of the challenges we are facing here regarding uranium exposure, as we've presented to them with now-President Jonathan Nez," 24th Navajo Nation Council Delegate Amber Kanazbah Crotty said.

"We have been informed by multiple individuals associated with that transition team, as you can imagine, they have a lot on their plate as they are trying to help the nation and ultimately the world, navigate through this pandemic. This is our top priority and we will follow up with the Biden-Harris team," Sandgren stated.

Council Delegate Kee Allen Begay, Jr. spoke to uranium clean-up funding and resources on the Navajo Nation, stressing the need to address the Claim 28 area of West Burnt Corn Wash.

"The Navajo Nation continues to wait on making a position statement regarding the uranium cleanup. But how do we factor in the RECA, as well?" Begay questioned.

Congressional candidates, including Senator-elect Mark Kelly, D-Ariz. and Representative Tom O'Halleran, R-Ariz. have observed environmental conditions relating to uranium mining in the community, Begay said.

Begay indicated he would like to see a more coordinated and comprehensive report on the Navajo Nation's comprehensive response to ongoing uranium contamination issues.

In response, Speaker Seth Damon indicated more resources from within the Navajo Nation government can be identified to build on the work of RECA lobbyist groups, but the current scope of work approved by the Council was specific to the RECA amendments.

"Our outreach has been broad. In Arizona, Innovative Policy listed the people who were contacted. The lobbying group alsopresented a detailed break-down of Congressional seats following the election.

House Committee on the Judiciary Chairman Jerrold Nadler, D-N.Y. and Vice Chairwoman Mary Gay Scanlon, D- Penn. indicated their desire to schedule a hearing on the RECA amendments after Jan. 1, 2021.

The report from Innovative Policy was accepted by the Naabik'íyáti' Committee of the 24th Navajo Nation Council by a vote of 19 in favor and 0 opposed.