

Begaye requests authority for tribes to oversee EPA functions

Written by Staff Reports

Friday, 09 November 2018 06:34



SAN FRANCISCO— During a roundtable discussion on Oct. 30 between tribal leaders and Region 9 of the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, President Russell Begaye pressed federal administrators to grant the Navajo Nation authority to manage its own environmental functions.

The roundtable, an integral part of the 26th annual Region 9 Tribal/EPA Conference, brought together leaders from many of the 148 federally recognized tribes in the states of Arizona, California and Nevada. Hosted by Region 9 Administrator Michael Stoker, the roundtable allowed leaders to ask questions and voice concerns.

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Begaye asked Stoker to develop a process that would transfer federal EPA authority to tribes, as capacity allows.

“Some of the larger tribes like the Navajo Nation have the capacity to manage these functions,” he said. “As an independent and sovereign nation, we want to be able to assume authority over our environmental resources. We can develop our own regulations and enforce them.”

The request is not unprecedented. In 2012, Congress passed the Helping Expedite and Advance Responsible Tribal Homeownership Act, a bill that created a voluntary, alternative land leasing process for tribes by amending the Indian Long-Term Leasing Act of 1955.

The act, which supports tribal self-determination, requires the Secretary of the Interior to approve tribal leasing regulations that are consistent with Interior regulations. Once leasing regulations are approved, tribes are authorized to negotiate and enter into leases without further federal approval.

A similar legislation could pave the way for the Navajo Nation to draft its own environmental regulations and assume EPA authority on Navajo land, Begaye said. His request comes as the Navajo Nation EPA, in conjunction with the U.S. EPA, continues to pursue the costly mitigation of the Nation’s legacy of uranium mining.

The U.S. EPA has entered into agreements and settlements valued at more than \$1.7 billion to reduce the highest risks from abandoned uranium mines on the Navajo Nation. The federal agency identified and prioritized 219 of the 523 abandoned mines for immediate mitigation.

If the tribe assumes EPA authority over its lands, it can decide how to use the settlement dollars and manage cleanup efforts in ways that best serve the Navajo Nation.

“Uranium was never part of Navajo culture,” Begaye said. “But it is part of our everyday lives today. We didn’t create this disaster, but we do have the capability and expertise to clean it up.

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We have the knowledge to heal the environment on our terms.”