

The 37th anniversary of the Church Rock uranium tailings spill

Written by By Jordon Johnson McKinley Collaborative for Health Equity
Friday, 22 July 2016 03:33



This year marks the 37th anniversary of the largest accident releasing radioactive materials in U.S. history.

In the early morning hours on July 16, 1979, an earthen dam that held liquid uranium waste broke, releasing 1,000 tons of solid radioactive mill waste and more than 90-million gallons of acidic and radioactive liquids into the Rio Puerco. The contaminants flowed downstream through the town of Gallup and across nine Navajo chapters.

Residents in the area tell stories of being out herding sheep and then seeing a wave of green liquid coming their way. Some of them were covered in it while they returned home.

The Red Water Pond Road and Church Rock communities live adjacent to this spill and have lived with the impacts of uranium mining and milling – the process of extracting uranium from mined uranium ore – since the 1960s. Within this small area are three Superfund sites, recognized by the Environmental Protection Agency as highly contaminated sites requiring

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cleanup.

There are two abandoned mine sites and a mill site – the Kerr-McGee Quivira mine site, the North East Church Rock mine, and the United Nuclear Corporation mill site. The combined proximity and lack of, or slow clean up of, these facilities has been a concern for residents since learning of the potential toxicity of uranium and the by-product of its mining and milling.

The community continues to respond to concerns about contaminated areas and to deal with the future cleanup process, as some people will relocate. The Red Water Pond Road Community Association has a strong connection to the land, with many families having lived in the area for over seven generations – long before uranium mining began here. Not only do members of this community suffer from ill health from working in the mines, but many individuals struggle with environmentally induced post-traumatic stress syndrome from their experiences living in the contaminated area and dealing with the slow and arduous cleanup process.

Despite recognition that these mine and mill sites require substantial and long-term cleanup to mitigate the existing effects of uranium mining to the area, to date, cleanup of existing abandoned uranium mines in the region has been adequate.

On July 16, the community journeyed to heal Mother Earth, as well as those living in the area. The Red Water Pond Road Community Association believes that people need to support one another and cherish all our families and communities, just as Diné elders have practiced.

This historic event was open to all ages, and people learned about the struggles encountered by community members on a daily basis, the healing yet to come for the people and Mother Earth, and the efforts to raise awareness in the local area, tribally, statewide, and nationally.

Information was available about the report *Looking Within: A Health Impact Assessment on Uranium Mining*. Given the historical lack of attention to the health risks associated with uranium mining, the years of impacts to McKinley County – including the Navajo Nation lands – and the devastating existing environmental contamination in Northwest New Mexico, McKinley Community PLACE MATTERS conducted a health impact assessment to analyze the impacts of uranium mining.

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