

Sen. Udall meets with Navajo farmers and leaders

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SHIPROCK – On Sept. 30, U.S. Sen. Tom Udall, D – N.M., Council Delegate Amber Kanazbah Crotty (Beclabito, Cove, Gadi’i’áhi/To’Koi, Red Valley, Tooh Haltsooi, Toadlena/Two Grey Hills, Tsé ałnáoz’t’l’í), and Council Delegate Tom Chee (Shiprock) met with Navajo farmers Earl and Cheryle Yazzie, a couple whose farming operations ceased soon after the Gold King Mine spill occurred in August 2015.

When the spill occurred, Udall met with the Yazzies and said he would do all he could to provide them justice and compensation for the losses they have experienced.

During the recent meeting, he said the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency is prolonging the process to provide compensation for farmers and ranchers in Navajo and non-Navajo communities, and would continue to push for accountability at the federal level.

“I just hope the Navajo Nation Council can understand our concerns and what it’s done to us – mentally, physically, and spiritually. It’s emotional. I am proud of our Navajo leadership for helping us, especially Sen. Udall—he has been a tremendous support to our family,” Cheryle Yazzie said.

The Yazzies said their family has relied on farming as their primary source of income for almost 39 years, but because they do not trust the water in the irrigation system, they refuse to farm until clean water is provided to their community. They added that the absence of farming has taken a toll on them financially and have relied on family for support.

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Delegate Crotty commended Udall and said that justice to the family is long overdue and that the affects of the mine spill would affect future Navajo generations who may not trust the produce that are grown in the Shiprock area.

“This is an assault on our human rights because it is preventing access to food, medicine, and who we are as Diné. Future generations may not trust our medicines such as corn pollen, which is not just a commodity—it is the essence of life,” Crotty said. “That is why we are demanding the fresh water upstream, because engineer-wise, that can come to the farmers and ranchers canals.”

Crotty said the discussion of diverting fresh water to the canals should have been discussed at the time the mine spill occurred so it would not affect Navajo farming and ranching. She added that the process of justice for the communities needs to restore trust and that help at the federal level from Udall is critical.

Chee said the federal government treats trust land differently from private landowners, who are generally compensated expeditiously when there are disasters to their land, farming and ranch operations.

“The federal government should just pay the value of the crop to the farmers, but because we are trust land, we don’t get the full funding,” Chee said. “Private land isn’t more valuable than trust land and we need to change that perception with the federal government.”

He added that in some instances when there is a national surplus of crops, farmers are told to idle their farming for a season and they are compensated by the U.S. Department of Agriculture, and said the same concept should be applied to Navajo farmers and ranchers who lose out on their operations for a certain amount of years.

Speaker of the 23rd Navajo Nation Council LoRenzo Bates (Nenahnezad, Newcomb, San Juan, Tiis Tsoh Sikaad, Tse’Daa’Kaan, Upper Fruitland) offered his appreciation to Sen. Udall for visiting the affected areas and aiding the Navajo Nation with compensation efforts for farmers and ranchers.

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“I would like to extend appreciation on behalf of the Navajo Nation Council to Sen. Udall for his concern of our Navajo citizens affected by the mine spill,” Bates said. “He has been very supportive of this issue since the spill occurred and we trust that he will expend every effort to ensure just compensation for our Diné communities.”

Also in attendance at the meeting were President Russell Begaye, Vice President Jonathan Nez, and Navajo Nation Washington Office executive director Jackson Brossy.