

Navajo EPA director testifies before congress

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Washington, DC – Navajo Nation Environmental Protection Administration Executive Director, Dr. Donald Benn, testified before the United States House Committee on Science, Space and Technology Sept. 9.

Benn's address was in regards to the Gold King Mine Spill.

Among other issues, he discussed the devastating effects of the chemical spill on the Navajo Nation and called for greater support from the Federal Government to address the crisis.

“The Navajo Nation’s impacts are felt most in the disruption of our cultural principle of hozho, which encompasses beauty, order, and harmony, and expresses the idea of striving to maintain balance in the Navajo universe,” he said. “The impairment of the River and the adverse impacts to our farmers and ranchers, and our community as a whole, will mark a moment of community trauma that will be remembered for years to come. This modernized trauma will compound our already significant historical trauma.”

The success of the NNEPA relies on a solid working relationship with USEPA and has always been critical, Benn said.

However, recent events relating to this spill have led to a complete shift in that relationship, as USEPA has sought to quiet our legitimate concerns and has made repeated missteps in their response efforts relating to the incident triggered by their own actions.

“From day one, USEPA has assumed a posture of mitigating losses even while taking the lead on the incident investigation and emergency response. We have grave concerns about the

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strong conflict of interest USEPA has with respect to this investigation and the emergency response,” he said.

Benn made the following specific requests of the Committee:

- Resources are needed to address the immediate emergency.
- Resources to study and address the long-term environmental and health impacts of the spill on the community are needed.
- FEMA coordination.
- A critical, independent examination of the existing USEPA organization with respect to coordination with the Navajo Nation, with serious consideration given to the creation of a Navajo USEPA Region or devolution of USEPA authority and funding directly to Navajo Nation’s own Environmental Protection Agency to assume USEPA’s responsibilities for the Navajo people.
- A fair and independent assessment of the role USEPA played in the events leading up to the chemical spill from the Gold King Mine.

This was the first of four Congressional hearings scheduled this month on the Gold King Mine Spill. Navajo Nation President Russell Begaye is scheduled to travel to Washington, DC and testify before the US Senate Committee on Indian Affairs on Sept.16 and before a joint hearing of the US House Natural Resources Committee and Oversight Committee on Sept. 17.

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