

Erin Brockovich visits the Navajo Nation

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SHIPROCK—Famed environmentalist Erin Brockovich visited the Navajo Nation Sept. 8, to see firsthand the damages caused by the Gold King Mine spill on Aug. 5.

Navajo Nation President Russell Begaye and Vice President Jonathan Nez met with Brockovich in Shiprock, at the hogan of Perry Begaye, to provide a briefing on the water contamination.

Chapter officials, community health representatives, Navajo Abandoned Mine Land staffers and tribal employees were also present for the report.

Brockovich said the plight of water contamination is being played out across the country and commended the efforts of Begaye and Nez to stand up to the US EPA.

“You are standing strong for your land, for your people, for your water. You are out there testing and that is something you will have to continue to do,” Brockovich said. “You cannot rely on the test results the EPA are giving you.”

She encouraged community members to monitor the river and possibly assist with testing the water because there are other mines at risk of breaching.

“This idea we’ve had that pollution through dilution is the solution is not true. The solution to pollution is to stop it,” Brockovich said.

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Nez said Operation To' Litso (Yellow Water) was executed to respond to the contamination of San Juan River, but was also an acknowledgement of Tleezh Litso (Yellow Dirt), the uranium mining that contaminated tribal land and water at the height of the cold war.

"We framed it that way, by calling it 'Operation Yellow Water,' to identify this entire ecosystem damage and the livelihood of our people. We want to raise the awareness of the abandoned uranium mines. They have yet to do cleanup," said Nez.

The group traveled to Hogback to see the canal that shutoff river water for Hogback, Shiprock and Gadiiahi chapters.

Afterward, they visited the farm of Earl and Cheryl Yazzie, Shiprock residents who lost their crop this year due to the water contamination.

From the premature tassels on the short stalks of corn to the miniature watermelons that should have been full size, the devastation of the family farm's harvest was evident.

Begaye said farmers depend on their crops to sustain their family economy for the year. They need to be reimbursed for their hardship, he said, adding that the EPA admitted that cleanup of the river will take decades.

At Shiprock High School's "Chieftain Pit," Begaye addressed the student body and reassured them that the US EPA would not get away with the river contamination.

"We've done that too many times. Companies come in and extract all kinds of natural resources and they leave their mess behind. We allowed them to get away with it. But not again," said Begaye.

Looking out into the student body assembled, Begaye said, "This generation will not allow companies to get away with destroying our natural resources that we enjoy," he said. We will be

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looking to you especially the senior class, to carry the mantle.

“You’re going to have to stand your ground. You’re going to have to stand firm and stand up to multi-billion dollar companies. You’re going to protect our people. You’re going to protect our land. You’re going to protect our way of life. You’re going to protect the Navajo Nation,” he said.

Begaye said a single person, a common citizen, can make all the difference in the world.

“You don’t have to be a scientist, you don’t have to have a law degree. You can be an ordinary person with the passion and love for your people to make a difference,” said Begaye. “I’m placing all my hopes in this class right here, on the Shiprock Chieftains and the schools across this Navajo Nation to protect our lands, our natural resources and we will continue to be a great nation.”

The group visited a uranium spill site, the Halchita water pumping station, attended the school assembly with students at Monument Valley High School, and met with the Kayenta Township Commission before concluding the tour for the day.

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