

An ongoing issue in the Southwest

Written by By Cody Begaye Contributing Editor
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‘Sun’ reflects on uranium effects

Uranium mining carries a heavy meaning on the Navajo Nation, perhaps more than any other part of the American Southwest. While the mines are mostly no longer in operation, they are still having an impact on many facets of life across the region.

Specifically, some of the mines scattered around the reservation are still contaminated with radioactive materials from their days in operation. The pollution seeps into local water and air supplies, rendering parts of the Navajo Nation uninhabitable and dangerous for people and wildlife.

In the decades since the mines opened and then closed in the middle of the 20th century, livestock have grazed on crops grown over lands where uranium was unearthed. Locals drank the water and built homes and other structures with materials taken from these sites. The prolonged exposure to uranium has left countless residents of the Navajo Nation ailing from various health complications and has led to the effective closures and sealings of certain

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stretches of land across the region.

The battle to hold the mining companies accountable for the decades of damage and ensuing cleanup is still a heated topic today. But there are plenty of advocates shining a spotlight on the victims and advocating on their behalf. One of these advocates is the International Uranium Film Festival.

FESTIVAL STOPS IN WINDOW ROCK

On March 7-8 at the Navajo Nation Museum in Window Rock, guests gathered for two days of what the IUFF calls “cutting edge films on nuclear issues” on the festival website. These films are meant to educate and stir audiences on topics including the effects of uranium mining and nuclear waste, as well as war and accidents that involved nuclear chemicals.

Since being founded in 2010 in Rio de Janeiro in Brazil, the festival has traveled through nine different countries including Germany, India, Portugal, Jordan, Norway, Canada, and the United States.

The festival was held in Window Rock for the first time in 2013. Navajo President Ben Shelly welcomed the guests to that event and reminded the attendants about the impact that over 40 years of uranium mining have had on the Navajo Nation.

“The Window Rock Uranium Film Festival was much more than just watching nuclear films. It was also a big gathering and platform to make friends and allies,” IUFF Director Norbert G. Suchanek said in a release published on their website. “Window Rock is the birthplace of the Uranium Film Festival. We will do our best to ensure that the festival returns to Window Rock [in

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2025].”

Following the stop in Window Rock, the festival has traveled to nine other cities across the U.S. as of press time. Remaining scheduled stops include Salem, Oregon and Las Vegas, Nevada.

OTHER LOCAL Stories

There have been countless gatherings and meetings held about the ongoing effects of nuclear fallout on the Navajo Nation, some of which have been previously discussed by the *Sun*.

It is first important to remember that there is an important saying for the Diné people: Tó éí iiná' at'é, or "Water is Life." Without water to hydrate both themselves, their livestock and other animals, and to grow crops and maintain a healthy state of being, life is unable to exist.

The *Sun* has spoken to local filmmakers such as Deidra Peaches about the importance of water on the Navajo Nation and how contamination from uranium is one of the barriers to clean water. There have been published reports on the City of Gallup's Annual Drinking Water Quality Report, which looks for contaminants in the city's drinking water, one of which can be traces of uranium.

As for other annual events, the *Sun* publishes reports about the commemorative walk in Church Rock each July. The Red Water Pond Road Community, Eastern Navajo Diné Against Uranium Mining, and the Pipeline Road Community on Navajo Nation host the walk every year to remember the Uranium Tailings Spill.

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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. It remains the largest accidental spill of radioactive materials in U.S. history.

The contaminants flowed downstream through Gallup and across nine Navajo chapters and into Arizona. There has been no reclamation; no study to see how far the contamination went and its impacts on local water systems and people's health; and United Nuclear Corporation has not been held accountable for the spill.

This story is not unfamiliar for longtime residents of the southwest. But even when companies are identified for being involved with contamination from these mines, holding them accountable and demanding reparations is another story entirely.

LOOKING TO THE FUTURE

In spite of the challenges that communities face including lingering health complications to other corporations either transporting uranium or resuming mining at new sites, advocacy continues across the Navajo Nation.

There are art galleries and shows dedicated to the showcasing the people most affected by the fallout. Media continues to be produced to educate the public on these matters, adding to a library that includes the short film *Tale of a Toxic Nation* and the book *Yellow Dirt: A Poisoned Land and the Betrayal of the Navajos*.

Groups continue to pressure Navajo officials including President Buu Nygren to call for strong

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accountability, cleanup, and reprimands to the corporations that have evaded the impact of uranium mining that the Navajo people continue to face.

Previous speakers with the *Sun* have affirmed that while the damage is done and is something that can't fully be covered by monetary compensation, continuing to fight for change is a crucial step for the future.

For more information on the International Uranium Film Festival, visit <https://uraniumfilmfestival.org/en>

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