

Begaye updates Sen. Udall on San Juan River contamination

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Asks for continued support from BIA

SHIPROCK—Navajo Nation President Russell Begaye and Vice President Jonathan Nez met with Sen. Tom Udall (D-N.M.) Sept. 3 and spoke about the aftermath of the Gold King Mine breach that occurred on August 5.

Attorney General Ethel Branch, Speaker LoRenzo Bates, Delegates Tom Chee and Amber Crotty, and chapter officials Duane Yazzie and Gilbert Harrison were also in attendance.

President Begaye expressed that the immediate concern was the demobilization of water tanks owned by the Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA) Navajo Region. The tanks are in use at affected chapters to provide water for livestock and irrigation. BIA crews and equipment are scheduled to leave the area by Saturday.

“We still need the BIA support and their water tanks. We are very concerned about the loss of the water tanks, as our canals are still closed. Hence, we have requested FEMA to intervene and help us in our time of crisis,” Begaye said.

Upstream, the San Juan River has been reopened for irrigation at Nenanezad, San Juan, Gadii’ahi and Upper Fruitland. Downstream, the river remains closed for both the Hogback and Shiprock chapters. Gaadii’ahi voted to reopen the river for irrigation and currently using electric pumps to draw water into the canal.

Senator Udall said that he has placed his field representative, Cal Curley, on the ground working since the mine spill occurred.

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“We’ve done a number of things: scheduling the hearings and getting Administrator McCarthy out here immediately. She was out here within a week,” Udall said. “The spiritual and emotional toll is very important. The agencies, instead of being bureaucratic, need to be understanding,”

Vice President Nez said there is still no word from the White House since the spill occurred last month.

“President Obama and FEMA need to be more proactive and declare this as a disaster area,” Nez said. “The Navajo Nation should have the affected tribal lands designated as its own EPA region. There would be less confusion this way.”

Begaye will testify and attend several Congressional hearings in Washington, D.C. to advocate for the Navajo farmers and ranchers impacted by the spill.