



# THE NAVAJO NATION

OFFICE OF THE PRESIDENT & VICE PRESIDENT

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## Navajo President Joe Shirley, Jr., asks U.S. Senate committee to respect Diné Natural Resources Protection Act, uranium ban

WASHINGTON, D.C. – Navajo Nation President Joe Shirley, Jr., on Wednesday asked a U.S. Senate committee to respect Navajo sovereignty and to uphold the 2005 Navajo prohibition on uranium mining.

Testifying before the Senate Committee on Energy & Natural Resources, President Shirley said the Navajo people have suffered through a traumatic and tragic experience of illness and death resulting from uranium mining from the 1940s until the 1970s, and they did not wish to repeat it – or be forced to by uranium mining companies who now want to return to Navajoland.

“The Navajo people do not want renewed uranium mining on or near the Navajo Nation,” President Shirley said. “I ask you to respect the Diné Natural Resources Protection Act that places a moratorium on Navajo land and within Navajo Indian Country.”

The President said the Nation would use “any and all measures” to fight the return of uranium mining to its land. Speaking forcefully, he said he is unwilling to risk the health, safety and welfare of his people against the promise that the proposed *in situ* leach mining process will keep them, their land and their water safe and free of more radioactive contamination.

“I will not risk the health and safety of my people on the promises of those who advance as a fact something for which there is little evidence,” he said. “I will not allow my



*While in Washington, D.C. on Wednesday, Navajo Nation President Joe Shirley, Jr., greeted Lindsey Holiday who is a Washington Internship for Native Students participant from Teec Nos Pos, Ariz. The President testified on uranium issues before the Senate Energy and Natural Resources Committee. Ms. Holiday's internship program offers students of sovereign Native American, Alaska Native, and Native Hawaiian nations the opportunity to build leadership skills while living, studying, and interning in Washington, D.C.  
Deswood Tome Photo*

Navajo people to be the guinea pigs of those seeking only profit. I will not sit idly by and watch as another generation of Navajos face a litany of cancers and other illnesses.”

The President said that uranium mining that takes place on land beyond the Navajo boundary will not and cannot hold its contaminants to within a narrow area.

“The contamination will travel,” he said. “It does not stay in one place. It moves as it has for decades, spreading contamination as it moves.”

The President said that the federal government should clean up existing contaminated sites before it promotes renewed uranium mining. The first-ever clean-up began last May – 24 years after radioactive water was discharged from the now-closed Northeast Church Rock, N.M., Uranium Mine into an arroyo that runs past several homes.

The committee is hearing testimony to reform the 136 year old mining law to address the 160,000 abandoned mines.

The U.S. EPA began a \$2.1 million project to remove 5,300 cubic feet of contaminated surface soil from a 125-acre area around the homes. But for years, the federal government denied that the site was actually on Navajo land.

“Decades after mining has ceased on the Navajo Nation, my people continue to get sick and die from the contamination left behind,” the President told the committee. “The legacy of uranium mining has devastated both the people and the land. The workers, their families, and their neighbors suffer increased incidences of cancers and other medical disorders caused by their exposure to uranium. Fathers and sons who went to work in the mines and the processing facilities brought the remnants of uranium into their homes at the end of the each day infecting their families.”

The President warned that despite the legacy of uranium mining, mining companies want to return, are promising vast revenues to the Nation, and are saying that no harm will come to the people, the land and the water. But President Shirley said he rejects those claims.

“The remnants of uranium activity continue to pollute our land, our water, and our lives,” he said. “It would be unforgivable to allow this cycle to continue for another generation. ... I have a hard time believing the claims of those who wish to profit from uranium mining that their “new” process is so much safer when history and science establish a different record. The Navajo people have been consistently lied to over the last 50-plus years by companies and government officials concerning the

effects of various mining activities.”

The President said companies are pitting Navajo-against-Navajo in the hopes of raising support for the return of uranium mining to Navajoland, despite the opposition of Navajo communities who have suffered from it in the past.

*“Decades after mining has ceased on the Navajo Nation, my people continue to get sick and die from the contamination left behind. The legacy of uranium mining has devastated both the people and the land.”*

– Navajo Nation President Joe Shirley, Jr.,

“By luring these Navajos with promises of riches, they have managed to divide the community against itself, and are now pressing hard to begin mining operations,” President Shirley said. “Are these the business practices that the Navajo people will have to look forward to in the great 21st Century Uranium Rush? Are we to be cast aside again so others may profit?”

He said some Navajos and their livestock are still forced to drink from contaminated wells. The only options for rectifying the problem, he said, is to find a new source of water, which is often unavailable, or by removing the contaminants from the existing sources.

“It is unconscionable to me that the federal government would consider allowing uranium mining to be restarted anywhere near the Navajo Nation when we are still suffering from previous mining activities,” he said.

Simon Boyce, the Navajo Nation Washington Office’s Legislative Director, oversees natural resource issues for the Navajo Nation in Washington and will monitor the bill’s activity and forthcoming mining reform bills.

Wednesday’s hearing was held as a discussion for the formation of a Senate mining reform bill. A House bill, HR 2262, was passed by the full House last November.