



THE NAVAJO NATION

OFFICE OF THE PRESIDENT & VICE PRESIDENT

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Navajo Nation Division of Health Director Anslem Roanhorse tells CDC that resources are needed to clean up uranium contamination

TUCSON, Ariz. – The Navajo Nation’s top health official told the federal Centers for Disease Control and Prevention that Navajos continue to live with the Cold War legacy of uranium mining, and that a long-term, comprehensive assessment and research program with adequate resources is needed to address it.

Anslem Roanhorse, Jr., executive director of the Navajo Nation Division of Health, said 520 radioactive uranium mines on the Navajo Nation were abandoned without being cleaned up. The uranium taken from Navajo land from 1944 to 1986 was used to meet the federal government’s demand for nuclear weapons material, he said.

Testifying Thursday before the bi-annual CDC and Agency for Toxic Substances Disease Registry Tribal Consultation session on the Environmental Public Health in Indian Country, Mr. Roanhorse said four million tons of uranium ore, known as “yellow cake,” were mined from Navajo land for more than 40 years.

“There are about 500 abandoned uranium mine sites throughout the Navajo Nation and only one has been fully assessed,” Mr. Roanhorse said. “At that site alone, the U.S. EPA estimated the total volume of contaminated materials to be about 871,000 cubic yards.”

By contrast, he said the federal government assisted the State of Missouri 25 years ago when it struggled with how to deal with 27 dioxin-contaminated sites – including the most infamous, the City of Times Beach site located near St. Louis.

He said in that instance, an incinerator was built at Times Beach so that approximately 200,000 cubic yards of contaminated soils could be burned. From completion of the site assessment to completion of the incineration, the

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– Anslem Roanhorse, Jr., executive director,
Navajo Nation Division of Health

project took approximately 14 years at a cost of \$110 million, he said.

This was the second tribal consultation session held by the CDC and ATSDR this year. Some 75 people from various Native American tribes, federal and state agencies gathered for the session. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention and the Agency for Toxic Substances and Disease Registry are two agencies within the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.

Mr. Roanhorse discussed a series of congressional hearings and briefings held last year regarding uranium contamination on the Navajo Nation. These included one held in October 2007 by the House Committee on Oversight and Government Reform. At that time, Committee Chairman Representative Henry D. Waxman, D-Calif., requested that the U.S. EPA, the U.S. Department of Energy, the U.S. Nuclear Regulatory Commission, the Bureau of Indian Affairs and the Indian Health Service conduct a comprehensive health assessment, conduct detailed site assessments, and to initiate, conduct or accelerate clean-up work.

“Numerous publications reveal that Navajo uranium miners were exposed to the dangers of uranium for decades without the benefit of protective equipment and adequate ventilation to mitigate the dangers of this type of work,” Mr. Roanhorse said. “The Navajo Division of Health urges the CDC and ATSDR to be key partners by supporting a long-term, comprehensive assessment and research program with adequate personnel and resources, and to include adequate levels of funding consistent with the coordinated five-year plan that Congressman Waxman required.”

ATSDR official Tom Sinks acknowledged the work of the Navajo Nation regarding uranium contamination. He committed the CDC and ATSDR to help with assessments such as water well surveys. He also said the CDC and ATSDR are working with the 5 federal agencies on its 5-year plan.

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