



The Navajo Nation Council — Office of the Speaker

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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

Resources Committee passes legislation to accept \$4.5 million for clean-up uranium tailings site near Tuba City, Ariz.

"The passing of this legislation will help to restore land for the Tuba City community such as providing more grazing pastures and opportunities for other community development projects."

-- Madeline Roanhorse, department manager for the Office of Abandoned Mines

WINDOW ROCK, Ariz. – The Resources Committee of the 21st Navajo Nation Council met today and passed Legislation No. 0065-10 pertaining to the clean-up of the uranium tailings site located northeast of Tuba City, Ariz.

The legislation, sponsored by Council Delegate George Arthur (T'iistoh Sikaad/San Juan/Nenanezad), passed the committee with a 6-1 vote. With the bill's passage, \$4.5 million will be utilized to clean the uranium site near Tuba City, which is located north of the former uranium processing facility known as Rare Metals Uranium. The site is also known as the Highway 160 site because of its northerly location off of U.S. Highway 160.

The legislation also includes extending the cooperative agreement dates between the Navajo Uranium Mill Trailing Remedial Action Program and the U.S. Department of Energy to carry out the ground water remedial action pursuant to U.S. Environmental Protection Agency ground water protection standards.

Council Delegate Arthur said the Highway 160 site tailings were left by the former uranium processing facility.

"In past years, there have been attempts to stabilize the site but it has failed various times," Arthur explained. "The Navajo Nation Environmental Protection Agency has been very instrumental in identifying the stabilization and clean-up initiatives, as well as lobbying for this site."

The \$4.5 million will be controlled by the Navajo Nation Environmental Protection Agency (NNEPA), the agency responsible for the investigation of the contaminated area since 2003.

Cassandra Bloedel, environmental program supervisor with NNEPA, explained, "In 2003, information was received by local families who knew of the contaminated site. They were witnesses to those uranium activities in the late 1950s and in the early 1960s."

"In February 2004, the site was reported to the U. S. Environmental Protection Agency, Emergency Response in which they came to the site for an investigation in May of 2004," Bloedel said. "The site was shown to have radioactive waste located within the area. The U.S. EPA did not find the mill balls that would later be discovered by Navajo EPA contractor Dr. William Walker."

"In January of 2006, Navajo EPA hired contractor Dr. William Walker to further investigate the site. Dr. Walker worked from 2006 into 2007 and identified further mill related waste, and finding of the mill balls used in uranium processing, and showed the site had high areas of radioactivity," added Bloedel.

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"In April 2007, the late Arlene Luther, then-department manager with NNEPA, was the one who approached the U.S. Department of Energy to have them respond to the Highway 160 Site since they were the later operators of the former Rare Metals Uranium Mill. The company did their own investigation of the site and determined that the site did possess waste from the former Rare Metals Site, and they were the ones who fenced in approximately 7.6-acres to protect humans and livestock that graze within this area," Bloedel said. "To further ensure stability of the site, a palliative cover that hardens like a crust was placed on top to prevent any contamination from leaving the site since there are very high winds such as 50 miles per hour that frequent the area."

"In March 2009, U. S. President Barack Obama passed the Omnibus Appropriation Bill -- Public Law 111-8 -- for \$5 million for the Highway 160 Site," Bloedel added. "Since there was no direct mechanism to pass the funds to Navajo EPA, they were redirected to the Navajo UMTRA Program since an existing MOA was in place."

Bloedel also mentioned the site is secure with fencing and is monitored on a monthly basis by the Navajo EPA with El Paso Natural Gas contractors.

Department Manager Madeline Roanhorse of the Office of Abandoned Mines, an agent to Arthur's legislation, also informed the committee the \$4.5 million will be utilized to hire technical staff at the site for project management on environmental clearance, site characterization and developing a design for remedial action and monitoring.

"The passing of this legislation will help to restore land for the Tuba City community such as providing more grazing pastures and opportunities for other community development projects," said Roanhorse.

The Resources Committee passed the legislation and it will now be considered by the Intergovernmental Relations Committee for its final adoption.

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