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Navajo, Hopi officials encourage public education in clean-up of radioactive contaminants at Tuba City site

Waste removal scheduled, NEPA hosting workshops

TUBA CITY, Ariz. -- Dangerous radioactive waste removal from a Tuba City dump site will soon be a reality this year after nearly 50 years of festering the ground with low-level radiation. The site is located north of the former uranium processing facility known as Rare Metals Uranium, approximately five miles northeast of Tuba City on Highway 160.

Officials from the To’Nanees’Dizi Chapter, the Hopi Tribe, The Navajo Nation and the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency are in the planning stages of a massive effort to dig up contaminants left by uranium ore processing from the 1960s.

The cleanup has raised concerns from local tribal leaders that want the project to be as safe as possible. Recent analysis of the dump site revealed radioactive contaminants to be leaking into an aquifer, threatening artesian wells and drinking water for residents near the contaminated area, including the Upper and Lower Villages of Moenkopi on the Hopi Reservation.

“I am concerned about the success of this project,” said Joshua Lavar Butler, Navajo Nation Councilman (To’Nanees’Dizi). “Area residents need to be reassured that the clean-up and transport of radioactive material is done in an effective and efficient manner without causing further harm to the surrounding area. It is vitally important federal and tribal officials begin educating and notifying people of concerns for safety and activities associated with this clean up. I will continue to keep our people informed and will urge the agencies involved to take all safety precautions to ensure it is done in a manner to protect the health of our people and of our environment.”

Hopi Tribal Chairman LeRoy N. Shingoitewa, who lives in the Upper Village of Moenkopi, also expressed concern.

“There is some radioactive contamination that is showing up in a plume that is coming off the Tuba City open dump,” Shingoitewa said. “The plume is also moving into the drinking water, so both the Hopi Tribe and Navajo Nation are working as partners very closely to make sure that the open dump site will be cleaned up.”

After securing congressional funding to relocate the uranium waste, a request for proposal was issued to contractors to dig up the waste, encapsulate it in special containers and transport it to a certified facility in Grand Junction, Colo.

“Navajo EPA put forward a bid solicitation in several newspapers, and now an Administrative Review is currently in progress,” said Cassandra Bloedel, environmental program supervisor with the Navajo Environmental Protection Agency (NEPA). “We hope a contractor will be on board by May 2011 so remediation can begin at the site that would include excavation of the fenced-in site, removal of the contaminants for transport, and final reclamation of the Highway 160 Project Site after verification by the U.S. Department of Energy.”

Nearly 50,000 residents live near the dump site in western portions of the Navajo Nation and the Hopi Reservation. Bloedel said Navajo EPA plans to have the site reclaimed by September 2011. The agency will be hosting a Radiation Awareness Workshop on April 27 and 28 at the To'Nanees'Dizi Chapter House between 8 a.m. and 5 p.m., three sessions on April 27 for the general public, and two more in-depth sessions on April 28 for emergency and public safety personnel.

Butler explained by majority vote of the Navajo Nation Council, uranium mining was banned in 2005 with the signature of then-President Joe Shirley Jr.

“The banning of uranium was the result of a culmination of frustrations, the experience of injustice by the federal court system and a reaction to the passage of RECA, the Radiation Exposure Compensation Act.” Butler said. “Today, many uranium sites and contaminants still exist as open mines contaminating drinking water. There are still hundreds of mines and pits that exist across the Navajo Nation. Many areas on the reservation still report high levels of arsenic and uranium. As a result, we must continue to pressure the federal government to clean up the sites – we must hold them accountable.”

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