



The 21st Navajo Nation Council
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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

Resources Committee, Navajo EPA and federal agencies meet with Rep. Waxman staffers on updates regarding Navajo uranium five year plan

WASHINGTON, D.C. – Last Thursday, members of the Resource Committee and the Navajo Environmental Protection Agency met with Rep. Henry Waxman's (D-CA) staff for an update on the progress of a Navajo uranium five-year plan implemented to address uranium contamination on the Navajo Nation.

The Navajo uranium five-year plan was initiated by Waxman in October 2007 following congressional hearings regarding uranium contamination on the Nation, and a directive was issued to have federal agencies collaborate with the Nation to address the issue. Both the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) and Navajo EPA are leading the cleanup efforts in partnership with the Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA), Indian Health Service (IHS), the Nuclear Regulatory Commission (NRC) and U.S. Department of Energy (DOE).

Jeff Baran, counsel for Waxman's Committee on Energy and Commerce, and Waxman's staff, facilitated the meeting where each agency provided updates in their respective areas.

Clancy Tenley and Deborah Schechter with U.S. EPA Region 9 opened up discussion on EPA's efforts to address uranium contamination at abandoned uranium mines, contaminated structures and water sources on the Navajo Nation.

"We have planned to cleanup seven structures by this fall," Schechter said. "The goal is to assess and remediate at least 500 structures by the end of calendar year 2012. We work closely with the Navajo EPA who identifies and refers structures for cleanup."

Since 2007, the U.S. EPA and Navajo EPA have assessed 199 structures, demolished 27 structures, completed 14 replacement homes, and have removed ten yards of contaminated soil in uranium contaminated regions across the Navajo Nation. In regards to water, Tenley said about 30 percent of Navajo families haul drinking water from unregulated waters that can contain uranium, arsenic and other standards. Currently, 235 unregulated water sources have been tested in uranium contaminated areas with 27 wells above uranium standards.

"There are many unregulated sources of water," Tenley said. "We are working with Navajo EPA, but at this point we are unaware of how many more contaminated water sources there are."

Recently, the U.S. EPA, IHS, and U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development committed over \$22 million for water infrastructure within 10 miles of 18 contaminated water sources, including water infrastructure serving over 300 homes and a water hauling program to serve 3,000 homes. Stephen Etsitty, executive director for Navajo EPA, said the Navajo Department of Water Resources will begin implementing the water hauling program.

"Our Navajo Department of Water Resources is ready to deploy the trucks, which will address water needs," he said.

On the issue of mining and mills, Tenley reported that in 2007 the EPA completed a multi-year effort to assess uranium contamination. In doing so, 520 mines have been identified as high risk mines in need of cleanup. It is U.S. EPA's goal to screen all 520 mines by the end of 2011. Currently, 87 mine screens are being screened.

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U.S. EPA representatives said the Northeast Church Rock mine is one of the highest priorities on the Navajo Nation. The mine is the largest known underground uranium mine in the country, and radioactive waste piles continue to flush into the nearby wash and onto land surrounding homes close to the mine. At the Northeast Church Rock site, approximately 100,000 cubic yards of contaminated soil have been removed and an Engineering Evaluation and Cost Analysis (EE/CA) for cleanup options has been developed.

Based on the EE/CA report, the EPA has identified five alternatives to address the site: 1) No action; 2) clean closure; 3) consolidation and covering of mine wastes at the site; 4) a repository on the Northeast Church Rock site; and 5) a repository at the United Nuclear Corporation (UNC) mill tailings area.

U.S. EPA's preference is to move all the mine contaminated material to the United Nuclear Corporation mill facility, which is alternative five under the EE/CA report. Removal of waste to the UNC mill facility would cost over \$40 million.

Tenley said total removal would be costly since the waste would need to be transported from the Northeast Church Rock site to a milling site in Idaho. The effort for total removal would cost \$293.6 million.

Honorable George Arthur (T'iistoh Bikaad/San Juan/Nenanezad), chairman of the Resources Committee, said the Navajo Nation's position for cleanup options has always been for full disposal of radioactive waste.

"It is the position of the Navajo Nation to have these contaminants removed from the Navajo Nation," Arthur said. "If such a site was located in a different area such as the city of Farmington, the waste would have been removed immediately. My people are still suffering from the effects of uranium."

"We understand that this option does not sit well with the federal agencies," Etsitty said. "I know EPA was hopeful the Navajo leadership would support a different alternative, but position still stands that we want total removal."

At the Skyline Mine, which is an abandoned mine in Oljato Chapter, surface surveys conducted by the Navajo EPA's Superfund program in the mid-2000s indicate that radioactivity is elevated atop the mesa's slope and side drainage. Navajo EPA's findings resulted in the U.S. EPA securing \$7.8 million to address waste the Navajo Abandoned Mines Land Program was not able to address in the 1990s.

On August 8, the Oljato Chapter passed a resolution supporting a waste repository being placed near the mine site and storing waste from nearby mines atop Oljato Mesa.

"We can make a difference at this mine site," Tenley said. "It will be a temporary and completely protected for the long and short term. We will have adequate resources."

Arthur said the news of the repository is a concern because temporary could mean a longer period of time.

"Temporary is not a good word," Arthur said. "Temporary could be a long time and by how federal agencies refer to temporary usually means many years. That is a concern. We want to make sure it is temporary and not long term."

Jack Reaver of the BIA said the Tuba City Open Dump is still undergoing investigation, since the BIA is the entity responsible for cleanup at that area. Navajo EPA expressed the need for more federal funding for this site because there is known plumes that have either moved toward or within major watersheds. The movement could possibly contaminate the Navajo Aquifer, a major groundwater supply to the Navajo Nation and Hopi Tribe.

"Tuba City has a shallow underground water system," Cassandra Bloedel, environmental program supervisor for Navajo EPA, said. "We have found uranium outside Tuba City Open Dump. We do not want to see contamination of these systems. This is a site that will need greater concentration of funding down the road."

Also at Tuba City is the Highway 160 site, which is monitored by the U.S. DOE. The role of DOE in the five year plan is to monitor and maintain the disposal cells and operate ground water treatment systems. The Highway 160 site is located north of the former uranium processing facility known as Rare Metals Uranium and located north of U.S. Highway 160. Ray Plienness of U.S. DOE said the Highway 160 site has been fenced off and a soil fixative has been applied by El Paso Natural Gas, who monitors the site on a monthly basis.

“We are much more involved with Navajo EPA and Navajo Department of Justice,” Plienness said. “We maintain involvement with the Navajo Uranium Mill Trailing Remedial Action Program (UMTRCA). We sponsored a Navajo Nation federal intern and will bring that person on full time. We feel we have done a much better job with Navajo EPA and Navajo DOJ.”

The DOE has provided funding to install and monitor new wells near Tuba City to address concerns about ground water contamination. Currently, nine wells have been identified and will be monitored by the Navajo Nation.

“We are in the process of having a public meeting at Tuba City,” Plienness said. “The meeting is to get a more engaged view from the public. I do not think there is adequate proof of contamination. We need some empirical data.”

Dave Taylor of Navajo DOJ disagreed, and added, “The Navajo Nation’s stance is there is a link based on a number of lines of proof. There is direct witness evidence and numerous Hopi and Navajo people saw trucks disposing waste, so there is proof.”

The Centers for Disease Control (CDC) reported in 2008 and 2009 it had assessed human exposure to drinking water contaminants and collected data from 296 households. The findings were that exposure to uranium was below levels known to cause health effects. During the 2009 and 2010 period, the CDC collaborated with the Navajo Division of Health to conduct follow up visits with households that participated in the study.

“The communities we are serving call for a comprehensive health study,” Estitty said, in response to the CDC’s update. “We are asking federal agencies for their perspectives on funding for a comprehensive health study.”

The CDC’s Agency for Toxic Substances and Disease Registry is currently in the process of conducting a study with the University of New Mexico that will evaluate potential associations with uranium exposure during pregnancy and adverse birth outcomes.

Dr. Doug Peter of Navajo Area IHS said there will be continual efforts to diagnose and treat health conditions to eligible beneficiaries with a history of non-occupational exposure to uranium. Peter also said IHS would assess additional case control studies on health conditions.

Bill Von Till of NRC said that NRC met with EPA-Region 9 to discuss criteria for enhancing the tailings cover at UNC Church Rock and recently met with the state of New Mexico to discuss a site wide feasibility study, evaluate remedial strategies to control plume migration towards Navajo Nation Land among other efforts.

At the end of the updates, all affiliated parties agreed progress had been made and that years of work remains to fully address the legacies of uranium mining on the Navajo Nation.

“I would like to thank all the agencies for implementing this five year plan,” Arthur said. “A lot of information still needs to be gathered. There is an urgency of Navajo leadership to encourage federal agencies to continue and maintain their initiatives to continue addressing the situation we have lived under for decades.”

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