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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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Navajo Nation President Begaye keeps restrictions in place for San Juan River

WINDOW ROCK – Navajo Nation President Russell Begaye has not lifted restrictions on opening the San Juan River for irrigation purposes.

“I am furious that the USEPA has placed the Navajo Nation into this position. Our farms will not last much longer without water and our resources are depleting,” said President Begaye. “These past few days I have visited with the farmers along the San Juan River because they are part of this decision.”

On Thursday, Aug. 20, Office of the President and Vice-President (OPVP) held a public meeting for the impacted chapters to give farmers and chapter officials a forum to express their concerns. During the meeting, five of seven San Juan River area chapter officials spoke against opening the river for irrigation.

The farmers were overwhelmingly concerned about contaminating their fields and crops.

“It was heartbreaking to hear farmer after farmer tell us they have said goodbye to their crops and made peace,” said Vice-President Jonathan Nez.

President Begaye asked community members to put a resolution before their respective chapters to vote on whether or not they want to open the river for irrigation.

On Friday, Aug. 21, through resolution, Shiprock Chapter voted 104 in favor, 0 opposed and 9 abstaining to keep the canals closed for a period of one year. Shiprock area farmers utilize the Hogback pump, which affects Tse Dah K’aan, Shiprock and Gadii’ahi chapters.

During this meeting a concerned farmer said he was against opening the irrigation. The farmer said he would instead save as many crops as he could by hauling water. Most of the crops on his 33 acres have not matured.

Having been raised a farmer himself, President Begaye realizes the impacts that keeping the water shut off will have to area farmers as they depend on crops for subsistence and income.

The Shiprock vote against opening the canals represents the community's concern to use precaution and not risk possible contamination to irrigation canals and crops.

The Navajo Nation Environmental Protection Agency (NNEPA) has reported that initial data from their water samples concurs with data from neighboring jurisdictions in supporting that water from the San Juan River is safe for irrigation purposes.

The USEPA has given initial reports on the soil, but the Navajo Nation will rely on the NNEPA for final test results. These soil samples are critical in identifying levels of metals that have settled along the river banks.

"I'm glad the water samples indicate the water is safe for irrigation use but I remain concerned over the soil and sediment that lines our river bank," said President Begaye. "Every time a heavy storm hits or the soil is disturbed it can recontaminate the water."

The NNEPA will have final results from their soil samples this week.

"The health of our Navajo people will always come first. As such, we must be diligent and cautious in making this decision," said Vice-President Nez.

President Begaye and Vice-President Nez remain firm in holding the USEPA accountable for releasing contaminants into the Animas and San Juan Rivers during the Gold King Mine spill.

While the river remains closed, the Navajo Nation will continue to work with the Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA) to provide water for irrigation, livestock and drinking purposes.