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President Shelly lauds \$13.2 million for cleanup of 16 abandoned uranium mines



President Shelly praised the announcement of \$13.2 million for the cleanup evaluation of 16 abandoned uranium mines across the Navajo Nation. However, he said there are still hundreds more that must be addressed for the health and safety of the Navajo people. He noted that it is the federal government's responsibility to cleanup this environmental hazard. (Photo by Rick Abasta)

WINDOW ROCK, Ariz.— The U.S. Department of Justice announced a settlement agreement with the Navajo Nation to provide \$13.2 million for the cleanup evaluation of 16 abandoned uranium mines located across the Navajo Nation.

The first phase settlement agreement for the abandoned uranium mines will establish an environmental response trust to pay for the evaluations. The inspection of the 16 sites will initiate solutions for the final cleanup.

“The Navajo Nation is working with U.S. EPA for cleanup of uranium contamination that was abandoned upon tribal lands after the Cold War,” President Shelly said. “Countless Navajos have suffered from the health and environmental impacts from this contamination.

“It is our hope the U.S. will finally accept responsibility for the cleanup of this uranium contamination,” he added.

The U.S. DOJ is increasing

their focus on environmental and health concerns across Indian Country. The commitment by the Obama administration to resolve these grievances from American Indian tribes is commendable, President Shelly said.

John Cruden, assistant attorney general for Justice Department Environmental and Natural Resources Division said the site evaluations are focused on mines that pose the most significant hazards.

“In partnership with our sister federal agencies, we will also continue our work to address the legacy of uranium mining on Navajo lands, including ongoing discussions with the Navajo Nation,” Cruden said.

Jared Blumenfeld, regional administrator for the U.S. EPA Pacific Southwest, said the EPA is proud to implement the historic settlement.

“It dovetails with our ongoing activities as we work together to make real progress on the environmental legacy of

uranium mining on the Navajo Nation,” Blumenfeld said.

From 1944 to 1986, approximately four million tons of uranium ore was extracted from Navajo Nation lands. The U.S. DOJ said the federal government, through the Atomic Energy Commission, was the sole purchaser of uranium until 1966, when commercial sales of uranium began.

The AEC continued to purchase ore until 1970. The last uranium mine on the Navajo Nation shut down in 1986.

Harrison Tsosie, attorney general for the Navajo Nation, said the environmental response trust is officially named the “Navajo Nation Abandoned Uranium Mine Environmental Response Trust – First Phase.”

He said Sadie Hoskie was selected to serve as trustee for the Nation. Hoskie was the first executive director of Navajo EPA. Most recently, she has served at the U.S. EPA Region 8 in Denver.

“She brings a unique combination of upper level administrative experience, technical environmental knowledge and a command of Navajo culture to this program,” Tsosie said.

A panel from the Navajo Nation made the selection of Hoskie. The panel consisted of representatives from the Office of the President and Vice President, Navajo EPA and the Dine’ Medicine Men’s Association.

Navajo DOJ demonstrated there were well qualified Navajos to fill these important positions, Tsosie said, adding that their goal of showcasing

competency was achieved. He said the Navajo Nation was optimistic about receiving a comprehensive settlement to restore tribal lands and the environment back into harmony.

President Shelly said, “I welcome this preliminary settlement agreement that will address 16 abandoned uranium mine sites. We have always said the U.S. is responsible for the cleanup of uranium legacy sites.”

The 16 sites are orphaned mines because the companies that operated the sites are no longer in existence.

Stephen Etsitty, executive director of Navajo EPA, said there are hundreds more that must be addressed.

“Sixteen abandoned uranium mines is a small number of the entire 521 sites on the current inventory,” Etsitty said. “However these 16 sites are high priority mines the Navajo Nation needs cleaned.

“They do not have a responsible party or viable company to provide the cleanup,” he added.

The Navajo Nation will continue to work with U.S. DOJ and the U.S. Department of Energy to provide cleanup of all abandoned uranium mines left on tribal lands.

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