



The Navajo Nation Office of the President and Vice President

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Navajo uranium mine workers share personal stories of hardship caused by uranium development

WINDOW ROCK – On Wednesday, Navajo Nation President Jonathan Nez and Vice President Myron Lizer welcomed U.S. Rep. Raúl M. Grijalva (D-Ariz.), Chairman of the U.S. House Natural Resources Committee, to the Navajo Nation for a public forum to hear from former Navajo uranium workers on the detrimental impacts of uranium mining on the Navajo Nation.

The forum gave the opportunity for former uranium mine workers, health and environmental professionals, and family members of those impacted by uranium mining to provide their personal stories of health problems, losing loved ones, birth defects caused by uranium, and the lack of resources available from the federal government to help with healthcare costs and treatment.

In his opening remarks, President Nez focused on the historical aspects and hardships caused by uranium mining and praised the efforts of the former uranium miners and their families for raising their concerns at the federal level.

“We are here today because of them — because they came to us as elected leaders, to demand that we work together to secure the justice and benefits that are long overdue. As leaders for our Navajo people, we’ve taken your words, your testimony, to the halls of Congress and we are very grateful that Chairman Grijalva recognized the injustices and devastation that uranium development has inflicted on our people, and our sacred homelands and we thank him for being with us today,” said President Nez.



PHOTO: Navajo Nation President Jonathan Nez, 24th Navajo Nation Council Speaker Seth Damon, Council Delegate Amber Kanazbah Crotty, and U.S. Rep. Raúl M. Grijalva (D-Ariz.) during the public forum at the Department of Diné Education on Oct. 2, 2019 in Window Rock, Ariz.

The first panel included former uranium mine workers including Leslie Begay, Tommy Reed, Walter Marwin, and Johnny Begay. Each spoke about their years of working in uranium mines without proper safety measures and equipment.

In a heartfelt account from Navajo veteran Johnny Begay, he spoke about earning \$3.20 an hour to work in dangerous conditions. He stated that his family members were exposed to uranium as well when washing his work clothes.



U.S. Marine Corps veteran Leslie Begay, who is a father of seven children and grandfather of 13

PHOTO: U.S. Rep. Raúl M. Grijalva (D-Ariz.) and former uranium mine workers during the public forum at the Department of Diné Education on Oct. 2, 2019 in Window Rock, Ariz.

grandchildren said he was diagnosed with lung cancer in 2015, following years of working in uranium mines without proper protections. He added that his mother was also a victim of uranium exposure and passed away from liver cancer in 2000.

The stories from the workers brought tears to many of the people seated in the audience and drew strong support from Chairman Grijalva, who offered words of encouragement and support for the workers and their families.

President Nez notes that the Navajo Nation has 524 known open uranium mine sites, with only 219 sites having funds available for clean-up and remediation efforts. A total of 305 sites needs to be addressed, and that poses a continued threat to our environment and the health of our Navajo people.

According to the U.S. EPA, approximately 30 million tons of uranium ore were extracted during mining operations within the Navajo Nation from 1944 to 1986. In July 1979, the United States experienced the most massive catastrophic spill of radioactive waste in the history of our country when over 94 million gallons of radioactive waste and over 1,100 tons of uranium waste spilled into the Rio Puerco and through Navajo lands in the area of Church Rock, N.M.

“We won’t know the actual amount of uranium mine waste left behind until remedial site evaluations are completed for all 524 abandoned uranium mine sites on the Navajo Nation. I have personally heard countless stories from angry and heartbroken Navajo people about how cancer has decimated Navajo families, killing fathers, mothers, sons, daughters, brothers, sisters, aunts, uncles, and cousins — they have every right to be angry and every right to demand justice,” added President Nez.

Over the past several years, President Nez and members of the 24th Navajo Nation Council including Council Delegate Amber Kanazbah Crotty have advocated for the former uranium workers, down wonders, and post-1971 mine workers to be included in the reauthorization of the Radiation Exposure Compensation Act by Congress.

The Nez-Lizer Administration thanks Chairman Grijalva and all of the panel participants for being a part of the public forum to support the Navajo Nation's efforts for justice.

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