



The 21st Navajo Nation Council
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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

Resources Committee hears report from U.S. EPA, efforts addressing uranium mining contamination appreciative, still not enough

WINDOW ROCK, Ariz. – On June 10, the Resources Committee of the 21st Navajo Nation Council accepted a report from the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency Region IX Office pertaining to efforts addressing uranium contamination on the Navajo Nation.

Clancy Tenley of the Region IX Office updated the committee on the five year cleanup plan, which was created in 2007 by Congressman Henry Waxman.

“In 2007, Congressman Waxman held hearings on this issue and brought in five federal agencies to address uranium’s effect on the Navajo Nation,” Tenley said. “We are now halfway through implementation of the five year plan. We are using mining regions to organize our efforts.”

According to Tenley’s report, the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), Indian Health Services (IHS), Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA), Department of Energy (DOE) and Nuclear Regulatory Commission (NRC) are the five federal agencies whose task is to address the legacy of uranium on the Navajo Nation through a five year plan.

As part of its efforts, the U.S. EPA in partnership with the Navajo EPA is to address uranium’s effect on structures, water and mines. The BIA is responsible for cleaning up the Tuba City Dump and IHS is responsible for health assessments.

“On structures, the problem was that people used rocks and sand for their homes which were contaminated,” Tenley said. “Our plan has been to assess 500 structures that are at highest risk in doing 100 per year and tear down and replace the structures that are contaminated.”

To date, the EPA has accessed 199 structures and demolished 27 structures, completed five replacement homes and removed ten yards of soil. Ten replacement structures are scheduled to be completed this spring.

Council Delegate Harriet Becenti (Manuelito/Rock Springs/Tseyatoh) asked if replacement structures were built on the same piece of contaminated land. In response, Tenley said it depends on whether the site is cleaned up or not.

In regards to water, Tenley said EPA does not shut down wells unless a chapter approves EPA to do so even if unregulated water resources exceed uranium, arsenic and other standards.

In an effort to address the need for clean water, the EPA has provided a two year grant for a water hauling pilot project to address emergency water needs, which is administered by the Navajo Department of Water Resources in conjunction with IHS.

Stephen B. Estitty, executive director for Navajo EPA, said, “We have been talking about trying to use a mobile unit for several years and now we finally have the opportunity. There are a lot of ideas and a lot of discussion in a two year period when the pilot project ends, where the money will come from and what other uses this program can have on the Navajo Nation.”

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Council Delegate Harry Williams (Coalmine Canyon/Toh Nanees Dizi) asked if the EPA was concentrating on certain areas of the Navajo Nation because there are needs on the western portion of the Navajo Nation such as Black Falls, Ariz.

Tenley said the Navajo Department of Water Resources is figuring where to put the water trucks. "In Tuba City, which is a uranium area as well as Black Falls have made requests for a truck to be located there and it is Water Resources who decides, but we certainly support that," he said.

Yolanda Barney, environment program supervisor for Navajo EPA's Public Water Systems, said Navajo Department of Water Resources has a plan in place and trucks would be located at field offices across the Navajo Nation. She also said water comes from a Navajo Tribal Utility Authority water source.

To date, 235 unregulated water sources have been tested in uranium contaminated areas with 28 wells above uranium standards. Two wells also have been shut down in the Baca-Prewitt, New Mexico areas of the Navajo Nation.

On the issue of mining and mills, Tenley reported in 2007 the EPA completed a multi-year effort to access uranium contamination. In doing so, 520 mines have been identified as high risk mines in need of cleanup such as Northeast Church Rock and Skyline mines. At the Church Rock site, the largest underground uranium mine and highest priority mine on the Navajo Nation, approximately 100,000 cubic yards of soil have been removed.

Council Delegate Williams expressed his frustration of EPA's efforts of addressing mines on outlying areas such as at Church Rock and said, "It seems like concentration is within thirty minutes driving distance of Window Rock and nothing beyond. It is only a half an hour from here. But if you go out to Black Falls and Oljato, Ariz., it seems like no one is making an effort to go out there."

In his summary, Tenley reported that the EPA spends approximately \$12 million per year and has identified responsible parties like General Electric who have spent \$5 million on the cleanup. He also said EPA will be providing funds to Navajo EPA for a Navajo Uranium Commission.

"One of the notions of this commission is that even though we have a five year plan in place that five year is not enough time to deal with everything on the Navajo Nation," Estitty said explaining the need. "Right now we have people in areas that are identified that we know about. As a government, we have the responsibility to take action."

Council Delegate Williams said the idea of a commission would create another bureaucratic layer and most likely would not be an effective process because federal and tribal agencies fail to respond to community needs such as those found in the Bennett Freeze area.

Council Delegate George Arthur (T'iistoh Bikaad/San Juan/Nenanezad), chairman for the Resources Committee, agreed.

"As much effort presenters and programs are doing to address the challenges, I am still concerned; overall, the federal agencies that were before the Waxman committee hearing failed to carryout anything sufficient," Arthur said. "It is appreciative that money is sent out to acquire five trucks for the water hauling project, but I do not think you will find a community impacted by this disaster to have a clean environment in their back yard for their children to play."

The committee accepted the report, 6-0.

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