



THE NAVAJO NATION

RUSSELL BEGAYE PRESIDENT
JONATHAN NEZ VICE PRESIDENT

CONTACT: Rick Abasta, Press Officer
Office of the President and Vice President
THE NAVAJO NATION
Phone: 928-871-7925
Fax: 928-871-4025
Email: rickyabasta@navajo-nsn.gov

August 9, 2015
FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

President Begaye announces U.S. EPA will be accountable for toxic spill



On Saturday evening at the Shiprock Chapter, President Begaye and Vice President Nez encouraged the public to remain safe and stay away from the San Juan River as the plume of contamination nears. President Begaye said the Nation will pursue legal action. (Photo by Rick Abasta)

WINDOW ROCK, Ariz.— Navajo Nation President Russell Begaye announced that he intends to take legal action against the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency for the massive release of mine waste into the Animas River near Silverton, Colorado.

President Begaye made this announcement Saturday evening at the Shiprock Chapter House, which was packed to capacity with concerned community members living along the San

Juan River.

“They are not going to get away with this,” President Begaye said of the destructive impact to natural habitats and ecosystems that traditional Navajo culture relies on.

He said the sludge has migrated into the San Juan River and is wending through the Navajo Nation. The plume is expected to reach Lake Powell by Wednesday.

President Begaye said, “The EPA was right in the middle of the disaster and we intend to

make sure the Navajo Nation recovers every dollar it spends cleaning up this mess and every dollar it loses as a result of injuries to our precious Navajo natural resources.”

“I have instructed Navajo Nation Department of Justice to take immediate action against the EPA to the fullest extent of the law to protect Navajo families and resources,” he added.

“The EPA also needs to fund an independent lab onsite for real time monitoring of

chemicals that may migrate into our irrigation or public water system,” said President Begaye.

Stories of struggle and survival

The chapter members were very appreciative that President Begaye and Vice President Jonathan Nez met with them in this moment of crisis as the plume of contamination approached their community.

The community shared their stories of struggle and survival along the river and underscored just how important farming and ranching is to their way of life and the economy of the region.

Shiprock is one of the largest farming communities on the Nation and it relies heavily upon irrigation from the San Juan to supply its many farms with water.

Navajo EPA will be conducting independent tests on the water and sediment quality and the Nation will utilize the data that is gathered for their own investigation on the contamination. The plume is estimated to be traveling at four miles per hour.

Harlan Cleveland of Navajo Nation Department of Emergency Management said the contaminated water plume reached Farmington at 8:10 a.m. on August 8 and joined the San Juan River.

The plume is more than 80 miles long.

Several communities have stopped pumping water from the river and San Juan County has issued an emergency declaration and closed the river until further notice.

Rex Koontz, deputy general manager of Navajo Tribal Utility Authority, stated in a press release that NTUA water systems from Farmington to Beclabito are “fed from a different system isolated from the San Juan River.”

The Navajo Nation irrigation systems ceased pulling water from the river earlier this week.

San Juan River is their Lifeline

President Begaye said the U.S. EPA must provide affected tribal members water for drinking, irrigation, and livestock. In addition, hay and feed will also be needed for livestock.

“The San Juan River is their lifeline. We want full disclosure on what chemicals were released into the river. We understand cleanup will take decades. We demand cleanup of this water and the sediments of our affected rivers immediately,” President Begaye said.

Navajo farmers pumped water for their cattle, sheep and horses. Others fished the river and explored it recreationally.

“We’re not talking about a small population or area like Farmington. We have Navajo families affected from Upper Fruitland all the way to Lake Powell,” President Begaye said.

The Navajo Nation is larger than 10 U.S. states and is the size of West Virginia. The San Juan River courses through much of the northern region of the Nation and feeds into the Colorado River, which also traverses the vast tribal territory.

Childhood memories of contamination

During his childhood, President Begaye lived along the banks of the San Juan River. One year, he remembered the fish were dying and floating to the surface. He jumped into the river with others to investigate further.

“The river smelled for weeks. Fish were dying along the riverbank. No one ever told us what happened, how the fish died or if it would impact our health years later. To this day, nobody told us. That will not happen this time,” President Begaye said.

-30-



President Begaye signs the Navajo Nation Declaration of Emergency for the San Juan River contamination. He said this will ensure the Navajo Nation resources are available to the emergency response team. (Photo by Rick Abasta)



Vice President Nez also signed the emergency declaration on Saturday evening at Shiprock Chapter. Council Delegate Amber Crotty looks on and was in attendance along with Delegate Tom Chee and Speaker LoRenzo Bates. (Photo by Rick Abasta)