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**President Nez testifies before the U.S. Senate Committee
on Indian Affairs in support of radiation exposure victims**



PHOTO: Navajo Nation President Jonathan Nez provides testimony before the U.S. Senate Committee on Indian Affairs during an official oversight field hearing entitled “America’s Nuclear Past: Examining the Effects of Radiation on Indian Country” on Oct. 7, 2019 at the Southwest Indian Polytechnic Institute in Albuquerque, N.M.

ALBUQUERQUE, N.M. – On Monday, Navajo Nation President Jonathan Nez provided testimony before the U.S. Senate Committee on Indian Affairs during an official oversight field hearing entitled “America’s Nuclear Past: Examining the Effects of Radiation on Indian Country” held at the Southwest Indian Polytechnic Institute in Albuquerque, N.M.

U.S. Sen. Tom Udall (D-N.M.) of New Mexico chaired the field hearing, which was held to examine the unique history and legacy of the atomic age in Indian Country and discuss efforts to ensure

that the federal government lives up to its obligations to compensate Native communities hurt by America's Cold War activities, as well as clean up and properly maintain abandoned uranium mines and sites. U.S. Reps. Ben Ray Lujan (D-N.M.) and Deb Haaland (D-N.M.) were also part of the field hearing.

"It has been 75 years since the United States opened up the Navajo Nation for uranium mining and 40 years since the catastrophic Church Rock uranium mill spill. The impact is not only physical but spiritual and emotional and will continue to cause much suffering for the Navajo people into the foreseeable future at a much greater rate if measures are not taken by the federal government to help mitigate the impacts," said President Nez.

Approximately 30 million tons of uranium ore was extracted from Navajo lands during mining operations from 1944 to 1986 to support America's nuclear activities such as the U.S. Military's Manhattan Project, World War II, and the Cold War. At that time, the United States Atomic Energy Commission was the sole purchaser of all uranium ore mined in the United States until 1970. A uranium mining boom transpired from these activities which led to the creation of hundreds of mines on and around the Navajo Nation.

"This meant that many of our Navajo people worked in these mines without proper safety measures without knowing the long-term effects that it would have on them and their loved ones. Once the Cold War ended and the federal government no longer needed uranium ore to produce nuclear weapons, all of these mines were abandoned without any reclamation, let alone remediation," added President Nez.

The testimony also notes that there are approximately 524 abandoned uranium mine sites on the Navajo Nation, while the Navajo Nation estimates that there could be far more. Only 219 of these sites have available funds for clean-up and remediation efforts, leaving a total of 305 sites that have not been addressed and continue to pose severe environmental and health hazards. The Navajo Nation estimates that it will cost an additional \$3.5 billion to address the remaining 305 sites, which does not include the cost of long-term monitoring and maintenance.

"The uranium legacy on the Navajo Nation is expansive, costly and remediation efforts are fragmented across numerous federal agencies, including the Environmental Protection Agency, Bureau of Indian Affairs, Nuclear Regulatory Commission, Department of Energy, Indian Health Service, and the Agency for Toxic Substances and Disease Registry, just to name a few. This fragmentation results in constant state of evaluations and never seems to make any real changes," President Nez stated.

According to his testimony, in 2007 and 2014, the federal government developed a five-plan to address uranium contamination, however the Navajo Nation was not adequately consulted, which is evidenced by the fact that these plans fail. The Navajo Nation is presently developing another 10-Year plan with the U.S. EPA and once again, the Navajo Nation was not an active participant in the underlying development of this plan.

President Nez's testimony also spoke about the efforts put forth by the Navajo Nation to help victims of radiation exposure.

"Our Nation has created a Diné Uranium Remediation Advisory Commission to work with the Abandoned Mine Lands office, the EPA, and others to examine the impacts and to identify solutions. With the support of Council Delegate Amber Kanazbah Crotty, the Navajo Nation has set aside funds in our current fiscal year budget to hire a lobbyist to push for the reauthorization and expansion of benefits under the Radiation and Exposure Compensation Act, also known as RECA," President Nez said.

He added that under the proposed RECA bill, downwinders and post '71 mine workers will receive benefits that they are fully entitled to – this will bring some justice to them and their families, as many of them continue to suffer from cancer and other serious health problems. The Navajo Nation and Tuba City Regional Health Care Corporation also worked with the Cancer Support Community, Dr. Jill Biden, and other health professionals to establish the very first cancer treatment center on the Navajo Nation in the community of Tuba City, Arizona.

The Nez-Lizer Administration is also working with Indian Health Service to determine the feasibility of creating another cancer center as part of a new hospital facility that will replace the aging Gallup Indian Medical Center.

Community advocate Phil Harrison, who is part of the Navajo Uranium Radiation Victims Committee, was also part of the panel and pushed for the passage of the Radiation Exposure Compensation Act to help downwinders and former uranium mine workers.

President Nez recalled the heartbreaking stories from former Navajo uranium mine workers last week during a public forum held by U.S. Rep, Raúl Grijalva (D-AZ). He commended Leslie Begay, Tommy Reed, Walter Marwin, and Johnny Begay for sharing their personal experiences and continuing to fight for justice.

Navajo Nation EPA Executive Director Oliver Whaley and Navajo Nation Washington Office Executive Director Santee Lewis were also in attendance to offer support.

"The Nez-Lizer Administration thanks the Senate Committee on Indian Affairs for holding today's field hearing and we look forward to working with Congress to see how we can address the contamination of our lands and help our people suffering with serious health problems," said Vice President Myron Lizer.

To view President Nez's full testimony, please visit: https://www.opvp.navajo-nsn.gov/Portals/0/FILES/LATEST%20NEWS/2019/FINAL_SCIA%20Field%20Hearing%20Oct%207_President%20Nez.pdf.

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