



The Navajo Nation
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Navajo President Buu Nygren, Speaker Curley join D.C. march with uranium miners, families to seek RECA justice from Congress

WASHINGTON – Navajo Nation President Buu Nygren took to the sidewalks of the U.S. Capitol today with more than 50 people including Navajos, Hopis, Zunis, Lagunas and Acomas to send a message to the U.S. House of Representatives.

Carrying bright yellow banners and chanting “Pass RECA now,” the message was to help Navajo and Indigenous radiation victims.

“As Native nations, when we signed our treaties, we were asked, ‘Can you stand hand in hand with this country when we’re threatened? Can you stand with us and help protect this country?’ We said yes,” President Nygren said at a press conference in the Capitol. “And, so, our miners post-’71, all the way until the 1990s, went into those mines not knowing what they were going to go into.”

The President said all they knew was that it was for national security to keep the United States safe.

“You can see it in our people, in our Native nations, that when there is work to be done, regardless if they’ve got their cancer treatment, regardless of what is going into their bodies, they want to put themselves out there that so that our people can be helped,” he said.



Navajo President Buu Nygren walked with members of the Navajo Nation, Hopi Tribe and Zuni, Laguna and Acoma pueblos for uranium justice through RECA.

Among those standing beside President Nygren, Navajo Nation Council Speaker Crystalyne Curley and the families of uranium radiation victims were the sponsors of legislation to expand benefits to miners who have not been covered,

U.S Senators Ben Ray Luján (D-N.M.), Martin Heinrich (D-N.M.), Josh Hawley (R-Mo.), and the New Mexico Representatives Teresa Leger Fernández, Melanie Stansbury and Gabe Vasquez.

Today’s march was organized by the Navajo Nation Washington Office which raised more than \$40,000 from corporate donors and grants to fund travel and hotel accommodations.



Navajo President Buu Nygren told the press at Capitol Hill that when Native nations signed treaties and were asked if they'd defend the U.S., they said, "Yes."

"The demonstration is part of a broader national effort to pressure lawmakers to move swiftly on RECA before more lives are lost," said Navajo Nation Washington Office Director Justin Ahasteen. "With radiation-related illnesses still prevalent among Indigenous populations, and many sites on tribal lands still contaminated with radioactive waste, this is an issue that cannot wait."

On March 7, the Senate voted today 69-30 to advance the bipartisan legislation to strengthen RECA and extend the program for six years. Rather than being brought to a vote in the U.S. House, the 1990 law was allowed to expire on June 7.

The bill would have offered compensation for the first time to communities impacted by the first atomic bomb test in New Mexico. It would have expanded coverage for downwinders to residents of Alaska, Colorado, Idaho, Kentucky, Missouri, Montana, Tennessee and Guam. Areas of Nevada, Utah and Arizona not currently covered by RECA and additional uranium workers would also be covered.

Speaker Curley told reporters that several of the Navajo people present had boarded a bus in Albuquerque for the 37-hour, 1,885-mile ride after they'd finished their most recent cancer treatment.

"Many of our veterans, our workers, our grandmothers, our elders that are here," she said. "Some even marched in wheelchairs and also canes to get here. But it didn't stop them. It didn't stop them today."

Navajos and other tribes want to hear from

Congress, she said, that the issue to reauthorize the Radiation Exposure Compensation Act and have the House of Representatives approve needed amendments "is very important to every one of us, and we may be only a few."

"But there's thousands at home that continue to deal with the impacts of uranium mining," she said.

It's not a tribal issue but a national issue, she said.

"We're here to get a job done," she said. "With all of our federal partners here, we can provide justice to our Navajo people. Congress, hear my voices. We have the power to correct this historic injustice. Pass the RECA amendments so that our people can finally receive the justice and the recognition they deserve."

The failure to date to get RECA amendments passed rests with one man, Sen. Luján said.

"RECA has expired because of [U.S. House] Speaker [Mike] Johnson," he said. "It's been over five months since Senator Hawley and Senator Heinrich, Senator Crapo and I led the passage of bipartisan legislation to strengthen RECA with wide bipartisan support. It's hard to get 51 votes in the United States Senate. Our legislation earned the

support of our colleagues, including Majority Leader Chuck Schumer.”

If the bill had been allowed to come up for a House vote, Sen. Luján said, he is confident it would pass, and President Biden would sign it.

Sen. Hawley welcomed the Navajos and other tribes who had made the long journey from New Mexico and Arizona to be in Washington today.

“Here in the room today are folks who represent the suffering of this country, all across this country, because of the country’s nuclear radiation program,” he said. “But, also, who represent the heroism of this country.”

Since the House speaker allowed RECA to expire in June, he said, “the House has been on vacation for approximately 80 days. Now is the time for the House to act.”

The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency has reported that approximately 30 million tons of uranium ore was mined on the Navajo Nation between 1944 and 1986.

“After 1971, the uranium industry didn’t die, it was privatized,” NNWO Director Ahasteen said earlier.

The 1971 cutoff date could prevent thousands of affected Navajos from obtaining medical coverage, he said.

Phil Harrison, a longtime RECA advocate and cancer survivor, told the press his uranium miner father

died of lung cancer when he was only 43 years old. He followed him into the mines unaware of the dangers that ultimately took one of his kidneys. “I was given a shovel and was told to clear a path,” he said. “I was never told, ‘This is dangerous work for you, young man.’”



RECA advocate Phil Harrison lost his dad at age 43.

He said miners like him worked eight hours a day in the mines, drinking that cool, contaminated water.

“A gram can hurt you, mess up your DNA,” he said.

In 1991, he said, he got sick. He went to the hospital where the doctor told him his kidneys were infected. After that, he spent a year on dialysis.

“Why did I go to work?” he asked himself. “Just to provide for my children. That’s all we did was work but we didn’t get any training.”

He said Cove, Ariz., where he lived was a beautiful place.

“There was farming, cattle grazing, sheep grazing, birthday parties. Everybody was happy,” he said. “Five years later, over 400 men died.”

Speaking for uranium mine survivors and their families, Harrison, a veteran of countless trips to Washington for the same reason, said the people here arrived again for the same purpose.

“We want that justice,” he said. “We want that recognition. This work was done for natural security. We were the first responder to national security.”

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