



23RD NAVAJO NATION COUNCIL OFFICE OF THE SPEAKER

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Council calls for accountability at federal level for water contamination

WINDOW ROCK – The Navajo Nation Council today called for the federal Environmental Protection Agency and the contracting company that caused a breach in a dam at Gold King Mine in Colorado, to be held accountable for the ongoing contamination of water in the San Juan River in New Mexico.

As of Monday, the dam breach has led to over 3 million gallons of contamination to flow from the Animas River to the San Juan River, which is expected to reach Lake Powell in the state of Arizona by Wednesday evening.

Speaker LoRenzo Bates (Nenahnezad, Newcomb, San Juan, Tiis Tsoh Sikaad, Tse'Daa'Kaan, Upper Fruitland) called for Monday's meeting in response to many concerns and questions brought forth to Council members from the community members along the San Juan River.

"We are not getting data from the EPA concerning contaminants in the water and how those contaminants will impact our communities in the short and long-term," stated Speaker Bates, adding that the priority remains the safety and health of people and livestock in the region.

Throughout the meeting, Council members stated that many elderly people are afraid due to uncertainties over the safety of water in their communities and their homes, and called for the Office of the President and Vice President to formulate a plan of action with the programs, divisions, and departments under the executive branch.

Council Delegate Amber Kanazbah Crotty (Beclabito, Cove, Gadi'i'áhi/To'Koi, Red Valley, Tooh Haltsooi, Toadlena/Two Grey Hills, Tsé ałnáoz't'í) said she has yet to receive official notice or any correspondence from the federal EPA, and called for the EPA to establish a direct line of communication with the Navajo Nation.

"There's been a breach of trust responsibility and the nation-to-nation relationship between the federal government and the [Navajo] Nation," stated Delegate Crotty.

Council Delegate Leonard Tsosie (Baca/Prewitt, Casamero Lake, Counselor, Littlewater, Ojo Encino, Pueblo Pintado, Torreon, Whitehorse Lake) said he would not trust data provided by the EPA, adding that the Navajo Nation should demand an independent assessment to be conducted.

"The EPA has a conflict of interest when providing information in this case," said Delegate Tsosie. "We should demand an independent analytical team to provide us the information."

Delegate Tsosie also questioned why the Navajo Nation was not consulted by federal officials prior to the release of additional water in an attempt to dilute the contamination. He added that the release of the water caused the contamination to reach the Navajo Nation at a much quicker rate and demanded that federal officials consult with the Navajo Nation immediately.

San Juan County CEO Kim Carpenter said the county's main priority at the moment is ensuring that water is available for the estimated 60,000 head of livestock and for homeless people in the county, which includes several Navajo chapters.

Carpenter was joined by New Mexico Environment Department secretary Ryan Flynn, San Juan County Office of Emergency Management official Mike Mestes, Farmington Fire Department chief Terry Page, and John Longworth with the New Mexico Office of the State Engineer.

The federal EPA committed to providing an update, but failed to appear at Monday's meeting.

Sec. Flynn agreed that independent testing of the contaminated water is necessary, while noting that his staff is currently conducting testing and will share all of its information and data with the Navajo Nation. He added that initial test results indicate very high levels of metals including iron, copper, arsenic, lead, and many others.

"The state's position is that we expect the EPA to fully compensate for all injuries caused and will cause," stated Flynn, while firmly stating that the Environment Department would stand with the Navajo Nation to demand full and complete compensation from the federal EPA.

John Longworth with the New Mexico Office of the State Engineer, said he continues to caution the public and stated that although the water may appear to be clearing in some areas, many contaminants that are not visible may continue to exist and present health risks.

Officials from Navajo Tribal Utility Authority, Bureau of Indian Affairs, and Indian Health Services were also on hand to provide information and feedback.

Pearl Chamberlin with the BIA, said BIA Navajo Region director Sharon Pinto has assembled a team to focus on the issue and that one of their main concerns is over the safety of water at Bureau of Indian Education schools near the San Juan River.

Chamberlin said that water supplied to the schools is safe and that the BIA has requested additionally monitoring of the water as the new school year approaches.

Following Monday's meeting, Speaker Bates said the top priorities are keeping the public informed with accurate and factual information and providing water to farmers and livestock owners who are impacted by the contamination.

Speaker Bates said the Office of the Speaker will remain in contact with all entities and remains committed to providing timely information to the public as the situation evolves.

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