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Speakers Bates meets with top federal EPA official to discuss water contamination



PHOTO: Speaker LoRenzo Bates (right) meeting with U.S. Environmental Protection Agency Administrator Gina McCarthy on Aug. 13 regarding the contamination caused by a dam break at Gold King Mine.

SHIPROCK, N.M. – Speaker LoRenzo Bates (Nenahnezad, Newcomb, San Juan, Tiis Tsoh Sikaad, Tse’Daa’Kaan, Upper Fruitland) along with President Russell Begaye and Vice President Jonathan Nez on Thursday met with the head of the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, Gina McCarthy, to discuss the contamination of the Animas River and San Juan River as a result of a dam break at the Gold King Mine in Silverton, Colorado on Aug. 5.

Speaking directly to McCarthy, Speaker Bates said the EPA has a responsibility to keep the Navajo public as well as the Navajo Nation Council informed of all aspects of ongoing testing of contaminated water and to ensure the information is transparent.

“I have an obligation as Speaker of the Council to keep my colleagues informed and we in turn are obligated to keep our constituents informed as well,” stated Speaker Bates.

In reference to ongoing testing being conducted by the federal EPA, Speaker Bates said that it is critical to disclose whether the federal EPA is adhering to federal standards or those of the Navajo Nation EPA.

Jared Blumenfeld with EPA Region 9, said the federal EPA will follow both federal and Navajo Nation standards when testing and assessing results.

Speaker Bates also emphasized that Navajo elderly people may not fully understand the evolving situation and stressed the importance of continuing to update and educate those who depend on the contaminated waters for their livestock.

“My concern is for those who may not fully understand the risks and who may be continuing to use the water for their livestock,” stated Speaker Bates, adding that the EPA also needs to provide information in terms of the long-term impacts to the public as well.

Administrator McCarthy assured the Nation’s leadership that the federal EPA would not impose its standards over those of the Navajo Nation, but would ensure that all standards are met.

Additionally, McCarthy stated that the EPA will see the process through for the long-term and will work with the Navajo Nation cooperatively.

“We have an absolute responsibility to fulfill,” McCarthy said. “We understand that there was an incident and the EPA takes full responsibility.”

McCarthy also said that the EPA is beginning an investigation to gain an understanding of how and why the incident occurred and that they are also seeking an independent evaluation as well.

The EPA released initial test results gathered on Aug. 5 and 6, which is available on the Navajo Nation Council’s website at navajonationcouncil.org.

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