



23RD NAVAJO NATION COUNCIL OFFICE OF THE SPEAKER

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Council members meet with U.S. Senators regarding agricultural and environmental concerns

FARMINGTON, N.M. – Over the past weekend, Speaker LoRenzo Bates (Nenahnezad, Newcomb, San Juan, Tiis Tsoh Sikaad, Tse'Daa'Kaan, Upper Fruitland) met with U.S. Senator Tom Udall (D – NM) and U.S. Senator Martin Heinrich (D – NM) regarding concerns from local farmers who are affected by the Gold King Mine spill.

Speaker Bates said he received concerns from Navajo citizens who were affected by the water contamination and had questions regarding compensation for financial losses, and reached out to both Senators to advocate on their behalf.

“I’ve attended meetings within the areas that I represent and found that the majority of farmers had concerns regarding [President Russell Begaye’s] proposed lawsuit against the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency,” said Speaker Bates. “They are worried that they will not be compensated justly and in time because they were told that funds would go straight to the Nation if they were to win in federal court.”

Farmers requested to negotiate with federal EPA officials to receive individual compensation, rather than wait for a lawsuit to go through the lengthy court process, said Speaker Bates.

Sen. Udall compared the contamination of the Animas and San Juan Rivers to the uranium mines that were once open on the Navajo Nation, and the detrimental after effects that took place when the mines were shut down.

“The Navajo Nation went through this before to provide a claims process for uranium miners and their families, and they were compensated. However, the claim process took many years and it took extensive amount of time to educate the uranium miners and their families, and then get them the just compensation that they deserved,” said Sen. Udall.

Sen. Udall expressed concern regarding the change of administration when a new U.S. President is elected, and said that a new U.S. EPA director could be appointed which may prolong and affect the compensation process for farmers who may need it immediately.

Non-Navajo communities along the Animas River were provided with the U.S. EPA Standard Form 95, which would allow farmers to be compensated directly from the federal government for

losses incurred due to the contamination spill, “and many Navajo farmers would like the same option.” said Speaker Bates.

He added that although communities such as Shiprock and Hogback opted out of having their water turned on, farmers still need assistance to get them through the winter until next spring, and that many would like to be informed of their options through public education at their chapters.

Speaker Bates, who operates his own family farm and ranch in Upper Fruitland, said he sympathizes with the farmers and understands that they would feel much more comfortable if they were provided options for compensation.

“I think President Begaye can move forward with the Nation’s lawsuit, however local chapters should be able to provide information regarding the lawsuit and Standard Form 95,” said Sen. Udall. “I know the U.S. EPA is willing to work with individual farmers and the Nation. This isn’t an ‘either-or’ situation, the farmers were hurt the most and they need to be helped now.”

On Sept. 22, Sen. Udall and Heinrich introduced the Gold King Mine Spill Recovery Act, which will ensure that the U.S. EPA continues to work with affected communities by requiring the agency to compensate those who were impacted. It also requires the agency to work with the states and Tribes to fund and implement long-term monitoring of water quality from the mine, and to identify the risks of future spills by assessing other abandoned mines for cleanup.

In addition to the meeting regarding the water contamination, Sen. Heinrich visited Shiprock to meet with the Navajo Abandoned Mine Lands Reclamation (AML) and Uranium Mill Tailings Remedial Action (UMTRA) office for a briefing on continued reclamation efforts on abandoned uranium mines.

In attendance to the meeting was Council Delegate Amber Kanazbah Crotty (Beclabito, Cove, Gadi’i’áhi/To’Koi, Red Valley, Tooh Haltsooi, Toadlena/Two Grey Hills, Tsé ałnáoz’t’l’í), who has consistently voiced her support to continue remediation of abandoned uranium mines on Navajo land, and opposes any uranium mine development.

“The legacy of uranium contamination continues to negatively impact Navajo communities. Having Sen. Heinrich personally tour impacted communities and demonstrate a deep understanding of federal responsibility reinforces our commitment to remediate uranium contamination on the Navajo Nation,” said Delegate Crotty.

Following the briefing, Sen. Heinrich toured the Shiprock Disposal Site, a former uranium mill, in which the U.S. DOE now maintains and monitors potential impacts to the environment. Nearly 4 million tons of uranium was extracted from the Navajo Nation from 1944-1986.

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