



The 24TH NAVAJO NATION COUNCIL
Office of the Speaker

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24th Navajo Nation Council listens to Northern and Eastern Navajo Agency residents on uranium issues



PHOTO: The 24th Navajo Nation Council will have public hearings on uranium this week in Chinle and Tuba City. Nahata Dzil and Oljato will be the final two public hearings.

SHIPROCK, N.M. — The Naabik’iyáti’ Committee convened at Diné College South Campus in Shiprock March 5 for the start of the uranium public hearing series. Legislation No. 0380-19, for approval of the uranium cleanup position statement, was originally debated during the Navajo Nation Council 2020 Winter Session.

The legislation was subsequently withdrawn by the sponsor, Council Delegate Kee Allen Begay Jr., after several members of Council requested adding their communities to the listing of areas impacted by uranium to make the position statement more comprehensive.

“This (public hearing) will become a resolution of the 24th Navajo Nation Council,” said Speaker Seth Damon. “The president will eventually sign the position statement for the Navajo Nation.” He added that the Council met with the U.S. EPA Feb. 28 for one-on-one consultation regarding the 10-year plan. Speaker Damon said \$1.7 billion was available for the begin the cleanup of 219 mines.

Council and U.S. EPA consultation

According to the EPA, 46 priority sites were identified in 5-year plans, with most of the assessment work completed at the sites. There were 3,809 families that received access to safe drinking water through a partnership with IHS. Additionally, more than 1,000 homes were scanned and more than 50 homes with mining-related contamination were remediated.

From 2008-2019, the EPA coordinated with the Navajo Nation and completed field work assessments of 111 mines to determine the extent and volume of contamination at the mines. Preliminary assessments and site investigations were completed at seven mine claims located in two watershed areas. This included the Section 9 lease at Little Colorado River near Cameron, Ariz. and Mesa I mines 10 through 15 at Cove Wash in Cove, Ariz.

EPA reported that complete detailed assessments at 219 mines where the agency has secured funding or work commitment were completed. The agency anticipates complete engineering and evaluations-cost analyses for all sites where detailed assessments were completed to be done by 2024. Complete cleanup plans and designs at all sites are also scheduled to be finalized by 2024.

Navajo Nation position statement

Council Delegate Amber Crotty said Council wanted a position statement that encompassed the heart of the people. Law and Order Committee Chairwoman Eugenia Charles-Newton agreed and said that the position statement would be submitted to the federal government. “This is the first public hearing. We would like to hear from you on the Shiprock evaporation pond,” she said. Other delegates in attendance included Health, Education and Human Services Committee Chairman Daniel Tso, Resources and Development Committee Chairman Rickie Nez, Council Delegate Wilson Stewart Jr., and Council Delegate Jimmy Yellowhair.

Speaker Damon said the public hearing was an outreach effort to gather information on an issue that has been occupying the Navajo Nation for the past seven decades: uranium mining and its negative impact on Navajo communities. “We are working with U.S. EPA, Navajo AML-UMTRA, RECA, downwinders, IHS, chapters, and past leadership. We’re here to listen to your concerns and to gather as much information to include in the Navajo Nation’s uranium position statement,” he said.

Navajo Nation residents speak

The floor was opened to the public and residents were allowed three minutes to speak. Twenty-two people came forward to speak. Eva Stokley said she was speaking on behalf of her husband Peter and his mother, both originally from Burnt Corn, Ariz.

“I’m going to speak on the downwinders,” she said, struggling to hold back tears. She said residents from the area live in the traditional way, most often unaware of the uranium being carried downwind. She said many people were contracting cancer and other ailments.

Henry Tso spoke next and said uranium has impacted the land, air and water. He called the Navajo Nation Council the spearhead for the tribe. “You’re the spear that protects the Navajo Nation. We lost our mom and dad from Hard Rock due to uranium mining,” he said, adding that the Council needed to take action on uranium, which has been talked about for decades and studied numerous times. “We need to quit talking about it and do something,” he said.

Cove Chapter President James Benally said public hearings have already been conducted through the Navajo Nation Uranium Advisory Committee under former president Russell Begaye. “Region 9 Superfund has been meeting with us. Cove is doing removal site evaluation and engineering evaluation cost analysis in consultation with the tribal government,” he said. “Instead of trying to create something new, why don’t we let U.S. EPA be the lead agency? We can build capacity for Navajo AML.”

Too many studies

Terry Charley asked how long the issue would be studied, especially since it’s been 70 years since uranium extraction first began on Navajo land. “Too many studies and risk assessments have been done. Our people want action. They’re crying because of it. We have tons of radioactive waste, but we’ve yet to quantify this,” he said.



PHOTO: Shiprock Chapter President Duane “Chili” Yazzie said Navajos consider the earth to be their Mother and that she was cut open for uranium. He said prayers needed to be done to restore the Mother Earth back into harmony.

Shiprock Chapter President Duane “Chili” Yazzie said Navajos consider the earth as their Mother. “We as Diné people have this intrinsic relationship with our Earth Mother. She has a spirit and is alive. Uranium is a part of her body as a caution. But we uncovered it and the effects are tremendous,” he said. Yazzie said the land needed to be blessed through traditional Navajo prayer before it was returned back to normal.

Phil Harrison said he is originally from Cove, Ariz. and he is a former uranium miner and remediation worker. “I’m the lead consultant for the RECA Reauthorization of 2019,” he said, adding that he and others traveled to Washington, D.C. in 2007 to testify during the Waxman Hearing. “Uranium is eating us. Our kids and grandkids are going to ask us why we didn’t fix it. Let’s do something and take action today,” he said.

RECA genesis

Stella Tsosie Lake Valley Chapter Secretary-Treasurer said the first Radiation Exposure Compensation Act request came from Lake Valley Chapter. “It was started by a former miner, Sarah Benally. That’s where this RECA all started from. Today, people are compensated because of this,” she said, adding that her father hauled uranium ore in the mountains of Cove for a Colo.-based uranium company. Tsosie’s father met her mother working for the company and eventually moved to Oak Springs after constructing a home for his family. The foundation, however, was constructed from local stones contaminated with uranium. She said the uranium-contaminated structures still stand today and asked what entity would tear down the buildings.

San Juan County Commission Glojean Todacheene (D-Dist. 1) said her mother worked as a licensed nurse practitioner who contracted cancer and eventually lived to the age of 86. “In 1981, something was wrong with her and they had surgery. It was cancer and it was malignant,” she said. “(Navajos) are survivors and we’re really tough people, but I worry about our health.”

Crownpoint public hearing

The Naabik’iyáti’ Committee convened at Navajo Technical University Wellness Center March 6 for the second uranium public hearing. Speaker Seth Damon was joined by Chairman Daniel Tso, Council Delegate Jimmy Yellowhair, Council Delegate Kee Allen Begay Jr., Council Delegate Mark Freeland, Vice Chairman Edmund Yazzie, and Council Delegate Charlaine Tso. Twenty-one members of Crownpoint region stepped up to speak on the uranium impact from Church Rock mine.



PHOTO: San Juan County Commissioner Glojean Todacheene said she is worried about the health of the Navajo people. She noted that her mother passed from cancer due to uranium.

Speaker Damon provided an overview Feb. 28 meeting between the Naabik'iyáti' Committee and U.S. EPA. "This was the first time the Navajo Nation had one-on-one consultation with the U.S. EPA. The Navajo Nation received \$1.78 billion in funding from the Tronox bankruptcy settlement," he said. "\$300 million was authorized to Tetra Tech to start remediation dialogue for 219 mines. A second contract was for \$220 million for the first phase of the cleanup as early as June or July. To date, no mines have been remediated."

Red Water Pond Community Association

Sarah Henio from the Red Water Pond Community Association said she has worked for the organization since 2006, advocating on uranium-related issues. "Thank you to our leaders for hosting these public hearings for the proper planning and leadership for the livelihood of our people," she said. She said working with the U.S. EPA was "challenging" and that federal compensation for contaminated farms and land was non-existent. "They tell us to move. But our roots and our umbilical cords are tied to this land and western thought does not acknowledge Navajo Fundamental Law. Our sacred sites are contaminated: sweat lodges, traditional offering sites and ceremonial grounds for female puberty way," Henio said.

Larry King said he was born and raised in Church Rock and lived there for the past 60 years. He graduated high school in 1975 and began working at the Church Rock Mine in Aug. 1975. "In April 1983, I was laid off because the mine was shutting down. I witnessed the July 16, 1979 uranium spill. I saw the huge cracks in the uranium tailings pond. To this day, it remains the largest release of radioactive waste in the history of the U.S.," he said. Despite this fact, King said 3-Mile Island received more media attention. "Forty years later, Red Water Pond Community Association is still trying to get social justice for the people," he said.

Rita Cook said she lived near Red Water Pond Road in the 1960s, when exploratory drilling operations were taking place by uranium companies. "I remember the workers had no respect for people living out there. They started drilling and blue muck came out from the ground. They drilled many of these pits and they didn't have fencing. Many animals and people fell into the pits," she said. "We have every right to live a clean community. Twenty years later, lymphoma finally caught up with me."

Former leaders speak

Former Council Delegate Jonathan Perry expressed appreciation for the field hearings and said Diné Fundamental Law is a crucial part of the solution. “We’re lacking that key component. If we continue to ignore our Fundamental Law, we’re not going to be able to stand as a sovereign government,” he said. Former Speaker Johnny Naize said his constituents in the Blue Gap-Tachee Chapter were impacted by orphan mines in the area. “People who are affected need to be sitting at the table when we’re discussing the issue of cleanup,” he said.

Former president Peterson Zah said uranium cleanup needs to be the number priority for the Navajo Nation. He said Navajos need to be like cicadas and sing the same tune when it comes to the uranium issue. “This is an election year. There are only two Democrats left, Joe Biden and Bernie Sanders. You know about the coronavirus and white people are so afraid because of the potential for an epidemic outbreak. What they’re afraid of is what Navajos are going through with uranium,” he said.

The public hearings on uranium will continue this week when the Naabik’iyáti’ Committee will convene in Chinle March 13 and in Tuba City March 14.

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