



Navajo Nation Council applauds the two-year extension of the Radiation Exposure Compensation Act passed by Congress

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WINDOW ROCK, Ariz. — Speaker Seth Damon and the 24th Navajo Nation Council members applaud the House passage of a two-year extension of the Radiation Exposure Compensation Act (RECA) program for two years, allowing individuals more time to apply for the compensation they deserve. The United States Senate passed the extension in April. The bill now goes to the desk of President Joe Biden, who will sign the legislation into law at the White House this week.

This short-term extension provides lawmakers time to seek a long-term solution that would extend RECA into 2040, expand downwinder eligibility based on geographic residency, and expand the range of years that can be used for calculating exposure for specific individuals working in uranium mines, mills, or transporting uranium ore.

“We commend the leadership of New Mexico Senator Ben Ray Luján, Idaho Senator Mike Crapo, Utah Senator Mike Lee, and Congresswoman Teresa Leger Fernandez for their foresight and advocacy to get this passed through Congress. The Navajo Nation urges President Joe Biden to immediately sign this into law on behalf of the countless families dealing with the uranium legacy. The United States owes a great debt to our former uranium miners, downwinders, and the families suffering from the devastating sickness uranium brings,” said Speaker Seth Damon (Bááhaalí, Chichiltah, Manuelito, Red Rock, Rock Springs, Tséyatoh).

Senators Luján, Crapo, and Lee have been staunch advocates for RECA expansion efforts that would include coverage for those who lived downwind of above-ground atomic weapons tests in the 1950s and 1960s.

“For decades, the communities I represent have been advocating for those affected by uranium exposure, cancer, and the sickness it brings to our families. President Biden must reauthorize the Radiation Exposure Compensation Act program to get the compensation they need to survive. The uranium legacy has only caused harm and loss of life for hundreds of Navajo people,” said Council Delegate Thomas Walker Jr. (Birdsprings, Leupp, Tolani Lake, Coalmine Canyon, Cameron).

Last year, Resolution No. CO-60-21 was passed by the Navajo Nation Council requesting a United States Congressional hearing within the Navajo Nation on the long-term effects of uranium on the health of the Navajo people.

“The Navajo Nation is grateful to our Congressional representatives from Arizona, New Mexico, Utah, and Colorado for making the RECA reauthorization a top priority. Many of the uranium miners, truck drivers, and mill operators are no longer here because of this toxic mineral. Yet many left behind families who are dealing with the sickness and need our assistance. Compensation should not end here but be extended to all Navajo families exposed to the uranium legacy,” said Council Delegate Kee Allen Begay Jr. (Tachee/Blue Gap, Many Farms, Nazlini, Tselani/Cottonwood, Low Mountain).

Last week, Congresswoman Teresa Leger Fernández (D-NM) and Congressman Burgess Owens (UT-R) sent a bipartisan letter to Speaker Pelosi, Majority Leader Steny Hoyer, Majority Whip Jim Clyburn, Minority Leader Kevin McCarthy, and Minority Whip Steve Scalise urging leadership to bring the RECA Extension Act to the House Floor for an immediate vote.

“In 1945, the United States exploded the first atomic bomb at the Trinity Site in New Mexico. Over the next 48 years, the U.S. conducted more than 200 above-ground nuclear tests. As a result, many communities around the test sites currently suffer from lung cancer, pulmonary fibrosis, and other serious diseases. Unfortunately, decades later, many New Mexicans continue to fall ill due to radiation exposure. This two-year extension of RECA is a step in the right direction to secure a long-term extension and expansion of benefits and eligibility, but we have more work to do; we can’t turn our backs on our communities,” said Congresswoman Leger Fernández.

Madam Chair Amber Kanazbah Crotty (Cove, Toadlena/Two Grey Hills, Red Valley, Tsé’áłnáoozt’íí, Sheep Springs, Beclabito, Gad’ii’áhí/Tó Ko’í) shared her appreciation for the Post-71 Uranium Workers Committee and their families for their advocacy. She added, “Many women and children witnessed the sickness uranium exposure brought into their households. So many of our relatives dug up, breathed the dust, and were poisoned by the radiation. RECA is important to our families, and President Joe Biden must approve this extension into 2040.”

The Radiation Exposure Compensation Act was first enacted in 1990, then amended in 2000. Without reauthorization, the RECA program would end in July. The Navajo Nation Council and President Jonathan Nez worked with Congressional leaders on the extension while pushing forward its approval by the White House.

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